The Lexicon Conspiracy

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Chapter One: The Unremarkable Life of Nora Vale

The most **mundane** thing about the morning Eli disappeared was that it started exactly like every other morning.

Nora Vale woke at 6:47 a.m. — thirteen minutes before her alarm, as always — to the smell of burnt toast drifting up through the floorboards. She lay on her back and stared at the water stain on her ceiling. It looked like Ohio. It had looked like Ohio for as long as she could remember, and she had long since given up hoping it would look like something more interesting.

She could hear Eli moving around in the kitchen below — the scrape of a chair, the clink of a mug, the low murmur of the radio he kept on even though he never actually listened to it. These were the sounds of a Tuesday. She catalogued them the way she catalogued everything: without trying to, and without being able to stop.

This was the thing about Nora Vale that no one seemed to know what to do with. She noticed things. Not in the useful, dramatic way of detectives in films — no sudden eureka moments, no brilliant deductions announced to a stunned room. It was quieter than that. More like a low hum in the background of her

mind, steady and constant, picking up details the way a wool sweater picks up lint. The faint creak of the third stair. The way the kitchen light flickered twice before it caught. The fact that Eli had been burning his toast every morning for two weeks, which was new, because Eli — precise, careful, infuriatingly competent Eli — did not burn things.

She filed it away, the way she filed everything, and got out of bed.

The Vale household operated on a quiet sort of excellence that Nora had grown up inside of without ever quite feeling like she belonged to it.

Her father, Professor Daniel Vale, was a linguist whose specialty was dead and nearly-dead languages — the obscure dialects of ancient civilizations that most people didn't know had existed. He was the kind of man who got genuinely excited about verb conjugations and kept a framed photograph of a clay tablet on his office wall the way other people kept family portraits. He was warm and distracted and deeply kind, and he had once, memorably, forgotten to pick Nora up from school for three consecutive days because he was in the middle of translating a particularly compelling Akkadian inscription.

Her mother, Dr. Carolyn Vale, ran a nonprofit that had placed over two thousand refugees in stable housing across the city. She was organized in a way that felt almost supernatural — her calendar ran on fifteen-minute intervals, her email inbox had never once gone unread, and she could hold six simultaneous conversations without losing the thread of any of them. She was also the parent who remembered school pickups, dentist

appointments, and the names of all of Nora's teachers, even the ones Nora herself had forgotten.

And then there was Eli.

Elias Vale was eighteen years old and the most **astute** person Nora had ever met, which was saying something given that she'd grown up watching her father decode ancient languages over breakfast. Eli's mind worked differently from other people's — not faster, exactly, but *deeper*, like it had more floors. He spoke French, Mandarin, and passable Arabic. He played chess at a competitive level and had once explained to Nora, with genuine enthusiasm, the mathematical beauty of a particular endgame sequence for forty-five minutes without noticing her eyes glazing over. His teachers had cycled through every superlative available to them by the time he was fifteen and had eventually just started writing *exceptional* on everything and leaving it at that.

He was also, against all statistical probability, not insufferable about any of it. He helped Nora with her homework without making her feel stupid. He remembered her friends' names. He made her tea when she was stressed, with exactly the right amount of honey, without being asked. He was, in short, the kind of older brother that made you feel lucky and inadequate in equal measure.

Nora got B's. She was good at noticing things and bad at convincing anyone that this was a skill.

She came downstairs to find the kitchen empty.

The burnt toast sat in the toaster, a perfect black square. A half-drunk mug of coffee cooled on the counter, Eli's thumb-print

visible in the condensation on the side. The back door was open exactly two inches, letting in the grey October air, and the plastic chair on the back porch rocked slowly, as though someone had stood from it just moments ago.

"Eli?" she called.

Her voice went out into the quiet house and came back to her alone.

She checked the bathroom — empty. The living room — empty. The small study her father used when he worked from home — empty, and smelling of pipe tobacco and old paper the way it always did, with a half-eaten biscuit sitting forgotten beside the keyboard.

She went upstairs to Eli's room.

The bed was made with his usual hospital-corner precision. His backpack hung on the hook by the door, his lacrosse stick propped against the wall beside it. His phone sat on the desk, screen up, showing three unread messages from his friend Marcus and a low-battery warning. Eli never left without his phone. He was **enigmatic** about it in a way that Nora had always found slightly amusing — he claimed to hate how dependent everyone was on their devices, gave long speeches about the death of analogue experience, and then treated his own phone with a kind of anxious devotion, checking it constantly and keeping it charged to at least forty percent at all times, a personal rule he maintained with religious consistency.

The phone was at eleven percent.

Nora stood in the doorway and let her eyes move slowly around the room, the way she always did when something felt wrong but she couldn't yet say why.

Backpack. Phone. Half-drunk coffee. Open door. Rocking chair.

He stepped out for a minute, she told herself. He forgot something. He went to check the mail and got distracted talking to Mrs. Okafor next door, who was retired and could hold a conversation for upwards of forty minutes without appearing to notice the other person's discomfort.

But Mrs. Okafor was away visiting her daughter in Edinburgh. Nora knew this because she'd heard her mother mention it on Sunday.

She took another step into the room, and that was when she felt it — the particular quality of stillness that a room has when it has been left in a hurry. Not emptiness, exactly, but *absence*. The feeling that someone had been here very recently and was now very gone.

A cold, wordless **foreboding** settled over her like a change in weather, the kind you feel in your joints before you can see any clouds.

On the desk, just beneath Eli's phone, was a torn piece of paper she had never seen before.

She picked it up carefully, by the corner, the way her father had once taught her to handle old documents. The paper was thick and slightly rough, the kind that felt expensive. On one side was a short passage of text — perhaps six lines — written in a hand that was definitely not Eli's. His handwriting was architectural,

all straight lines and deliberate angles. This was different: fluid, looping, leaning slightly to the left, with unusual elongated letters that seemed almost decorative.

She couldn't read a single word of it.

The language wasn't one she recognized, and Nora was not entirely without reference points on that front, having grown up listening to her father discuss obscure ancient tongues at the dinner table. This was nothing she'd ever heard him mention. The characters had an angular underpinning beneath the cursive flourishes — mathematical, almost, in their precision — but they weren't any alphabet she could place.

In the bottom right corner of the page, stamped or burned into the paper rather than written on it, was a small symbol: two concentric circles bisected by a single vertical line.

Nora turned the paper over. The back was blank.

She stood very still for a long moment, looking at the symbol, feeling the foreboding settle deeper.

Then she took out her own phone and photographed both sides. She folded the paper carefully and put it in her jacket pocket. And she went back downstairs to wait, because her parents would be up soon, and there was a small, reasonable part of her that still believed Eli would walk back through the door at any moment, explaining that he'd just gone for an early run and lost track of time.

He did not.

By eight o'clock, when her parents came down and found her sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea she hadn't drunk, the story she told them was precise and complete, because Nora was good at that — at relaying information in the right order without editorializing, a skill that consistently failed to impress her English teachers but had other uses.

Her mother's response was to make a joke, the kind that people make when they aren't yet worried but feel that they should perform not-worrying convincingly. Her father checked Eli's room himself, came back looking thoughtful, and called Marcus.

Marcus hadn't seen Eli since the previous afternoon. He'd sent the three messages Nora had seen on the phone — *hey*, then *you good?*, then *eli?? * — and received no response.

By nine, the jokes had stopped.

By ten, her father had called two more of Eli's friends, Eli's chess coach, and the office at Whitmore University, which was not yet open.

By eleven, they called the police.

The officer who arrived was named PC Doyle, and he had the manner of a man who had attended many of these calls and found them, as a category, only mildly concerning. He was not unkind. He simply had the calm, efficient affect of someone who had learned to hold their worry in reserve, dispensing it only when the evidence warranted it, and the evidence, in his professional assessment, did not yet warrant it.

"Most cases like this," he said, sitting across from Nora's parents at the kitchen table with his clipboard, "the young person turns up within forty-eight hours. A friend's place, a family member's, sometimes just — they needed a bit of space and forgot to mention it."

"He's not that kind of person," Nora's mother said.

"Of course." PC Doyle nodded, writing something. "Any reason to think he was upset recently? Arguments at home, stress about school, any changes in behavior?"

Nora thought about two weeks of burnt toast. She thought about the way Eli had been lately — not sad, not troubled in any visible way, but *inward*, like a person carrying something heavy who had quietly rearranged their posture so you wouldn't notice. She thought about the way he'd started keeping his bedroom door closed, which he never used to do, and the way he'd been spending long hours in their father's study with the door shut, which their father hadn't mentioned because their father frequently didn't notice things that weren't written in ancient Akkadian.

"He's been a little distracted," she said.

Her mother looked at her sharply. "He's been perfectly fine. He's been excited about the university program."

PC Doyle wrote something else. He asked a few more questions — had Eli been in contact with anyone new, did he have any financial worries, was there any history of mental health concerns — and her parents answered carefully and thoroughly, the way academics answer questions, with appropriate qualifications and no wasted words.

Then he gave them a card, explained the process for filing a formal report, and left.

The whole thing took forty-five minutes. Nora stood at the living room window and watched his car pull away from the curb with the measured unhaste of a vehicle that was not going anywhere particularly urgent. The investigation, such as it was, had been **cursory** — a necessary ritual, competently performed, that she was fairly certain would produce nothing useful. PC Doyle had done his job. His job was to collect information and wait. Nora was not, constitutionally, a person who was good at waiting.

She went back upstairs.

Eli's room looked the same as it had that morning, which meant it looked like Eli — orderly, specific, full of objects that had been chosen rather than accumulated. The bookshelf alone told you more about him than most people's entire bedrooms: linguistics and mathematics alongside fantasy novels and chess theory and a battered copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* that he'd read four times. The chess trophies lined up on the windowsill, smallest to largest. The framed photograph of the two of them at the coast when Nora was eight and Eli was ten, squinting into the sun, Eli's hand on her shoulder.

She turned away from that last one and got to work.

She was thorough in the way that came naturally to her, **scrutinizing** every surface and then, methodically, every drawer. She wasn't sure what she was looking for — something that would explain the torn paper, the strange symbol, the red mark on the calendar. She opened his desk drawers one by one,

lifting papers and setting them aside, cataloguing and replacing. She checked under the mattress, inside his pillowcases, behind the books on the shelf.

She found his desk calendar near the bottom of a drawer, slid under a folder of university application materials. It was a small paper one, the kind her father used, and Eli had filled it in with his usual color-coded precision: blue for academic, green for personal, red for urgent.

On yesterday's date — Monday the thirteenth — there was a red mark.

A single word, underlined twice: *TONIGHT*.

Nothing else. No location. No time. Just the word, sitting there in red ink, significant and entirely uninformative.

Nora took a photograph of it. Then she sat down in Eli's desk chair, took the torn paper from her pocket, and laid them side by side on the desk — the calendar page and the foreign text with its strange symbol.

She looked at them for a long time.

Her father studied languages. Her mother solved logistical problems at scale. Eli was exceptional in ways that had always felt slightly out of reach from where Nora was standing.

But Nora noticed things. And what she noticed, sitting in her brother's carefully ordered room with two small pieces of evidence in front of her, was this: whatever had happened to Eli had not been sudden. He had known something was coming. He had written *TONIGHT* in red, which meant he had planned for it — or braced for it — and he had kept a piece of paper in a

language no one in this house could read, and he had not told anyone, not even her.

Which meant either he had been protecting them, or he had been protecting something else.

She folded both papers, tucked them into her jacket, and stood up.

From downstairs she could hear her parents' voices — low, careful, the particular cadence of two intelligent people trying to hold themselves together through the application of reason. They would make calls. They would follow procedure. They would trust the systems they had always trusted, because those systems had generally served them well.

Nora had nothing against procedure. She simply suspected, with the quiet certainty of someone who had been noticing things her whole life without anyone paying much attention, that procedure was not going to find Eli.

She pulled on her jacket, checked that both papers were secure in her pocket, and went to the window. The street below was the same grey Tuesday it always was — Mrs. Okafor's empty house, the oak tree losing its leaves in the wind, a man walking a dog at the far end of the block who looked briefly up at the sky as though checking for rain.

Nora watched him for a moment. Then she turned away, went to her room, and sat down at her desk with her laptop and the photograph she'd taken of the strange symbol — two concentric circles, one vertical line — and began, with characteristic **diligence**, to look for answers.

She had learned, sixteen years into being the less remarkable Vale, that the only difference between noticing things and doing something about them was a decision.

She had made hers.

SAT Words in This Chapter: mundane · astute · enigmatic · foreboding · cursory · scrutinize · diligence

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Two: What the Police Don't See

The internet, Nora discovered, knew nothing about two concentric circles bisected by a vertical line.

This was, in itself, unusual. The internet knew about everything. She had once, on a slow Sunday, found a twelve-page forum thread dedicated to the correct historical footwear of fourteenth-century Venetian merchants. She had found detailed taxonomies of cloud formations, the complete maintenance logs of a decommissioned Soviet submarine, and a website run by a man in Manitoba who had spent eleven years cataloguing every variety of lichen found in his backyard. The internet did not typically come up empty.

She tried every combination of search terms she could construct. *Two circles vertical line symbol ancient*. *Concentric circle bisected symbol meaning*. *Unknown symbol secret society*. That last one produced, predictably, approximately four million results about the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and a surprisingly large number of people who believed that the Starbucks logo contained hidden messages. None of them matched what she was looking at.

She tried image search, uploading the photograph she'd taken of the torn paper. The closest match the algorithm offered was a diagram from a 1960s physics textbook illustrating the concept of magnetic fields. This was not helpful.

She spent an hour on it, methodically, with the same quiet **tenacity** she brought to everything she decided was worth her

attention. By the time the light outside her window had gone from grey to the particular shade of dark grey that constituted evening in October, she had ruled out: heraldic symbols, alchemical notation, astronomical charts, corporate logos, military insignia, and the collected iconography of seventeen different secret societies. She had also, as a side note, ruled out the Freemasons.

The text itself was even less forthcoming. She had photographed that too — the six lines of looping, angular script — and run it through every online translation tool she could find, which was a **futile** exercise, since translation tools required at minimum a hypothesis about what language you were dealing with, and Nora had no hypothesis. The tools returned errors, or silence, or in one case a message informing her that the input appeared to be corrupted.

It was not corrupted. She could see it perfectly clearly. Whatever it was, it simply didn't exist in any database she had access to.

She leaned back in her chair and thought about her father.

Professor Daniel Vale's specialty was obscure ancient dialects — languages that had died out centuries or millennia ago, spoken by civilizations that most of the modern world had never heard of. He had bookshelves in his university office that contained texts in languages with fewer than a hundred known speakers, most of them long dead. He had, at various dinner tables, read aloud from tablets and scrolls in tongues that hadn't been heard in the open air for two thousand years, while Nora and Eli sat across from him and politely waited for him to finish.

If anyone could identify the script on that paper, it was him.

But showing her father the paper meant telling him where she'd found it, which meant telling him she'd been in Eli's room going through his belongings, which meant a conversation she wasn't ready to have yet. Her parents were downstairs right now in the state she privately thought of as *controlled distress* — the way highly competent people fall apart, which is methodically, with good posture. Her mother had made three phone calls and a spreadsheet. Her father had reorganized his study. Neither of them needed Nora appearing with a mysterious piece of paper and a set of questions that would make everything feel more alarming.

Not tonight.

She looked at the photograph on her screen for another long moment. Then she closed her laptop, lay down on her bed without taking off her shoes, and stared at Ohio on the ceiling.

He had known something was coming.

That was the thing she kept returning to. *TONIGHT*, in red ink, underlined twice. Eli did not underline things for decoration. He underlined things because they were important, and he used red because red meant urgent, and he had written it on a Monday and disappeared on the night of that Monday, which was either a terrible coincidence or not a coincidence at all.

He had known. And he hadn't told her.

She fell asleep, eventually, still in her jacket, with the lights on.

In the morning, things were worse in the way that mornings reliably make things worse — sharper, more real, stripped of the

slight unreality that night provides as a kind of cushion.

Her mother was on the phone with someone from the police station, speaking in the measured, **assertive** tone she used when she needed information from institutions that were not inclined to provide it promptly. Her father was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea he wasn't drinking and a newspaper he wasn't reading, his eyes moving slowly over the same paragraph in a way that suggested he wasn't reading that either.

Nora made herself toast — not burnt, she noticed, and then wished she hadn't noticed — and sat across from him.

"Dad," she said.

"Mm." He looked up. His eyes were tired in a way that made him look older, and Nora felt something tighten in her chest that she pushed firmly to the side, because she needed to think clearly and grief, or the thing that was adjacent to grief when you didn't yet know if there was anything to grieve, was not helpful to clear thinking.

"Has Eli talked to you recently about anything unusual? Anything he was working on?"

Her father considered this with the seriousness he gave all questions. "He came into my study on Saturday," he said slowly. "He wanted to look at some of my reference books. The comparative linguistics section, I think. He said it was for a project."

"What kind of project?"

"He didn't say. I didn't ask." He paused. "I should have asked."

"Which books did he take?"

Her father frowned. "I'm not sure he took any. He just — looked at them. For quite a long time." He looked at Nora with an expression that was equal parts distress and curiosity, the two states he most frequently inhabited. "Why?"

"Just wondering," Nora said, which was not really an answer, and they both knew it, and her father was kind enough not to push.

She went to his study after breakfast.

The study was a small room at the back of the house that smelled permanently of pipe tobacco and old paper, even though her father had given up the pipe several years ago. The smell had simply soaked into the walls and decided to stay, which Nora had always found oddly comforting. The bookshelves ran floor to ceiling on three walls, packed with texts in a **multitude** of languages, and the desk in the centre was covered in the particular organized chaos of an academic who knew exactly where everything was and would be **indignant** if anyone tried to tidy it.

Nora stood in the middle of the room and looked at the comparative linguistics section, which occupied most of the east wall. There were hundreds of volumes. She had no way of knowing which ones Eli had looked at — her father hadn't watched closely enough to notice, which was characteristic — but she stood there for a while anyway, reading the spines, looking for anything that might suggest a connection.

Most of them were what she expected: academic texts in Latin, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, Sumerian. Reference volumes on Proto-Indo-European, on extinct Anatolian languages, on the undeciphered scripts of the ancient world. Her father had a particular interest in the latter category. The shelf dedicated to undeciphered scripts alone was nearly a metre wide.

Nora stopped.

Undeciphered scripts.

She pulled out her phone and looked at the photograph again — the looping, angular characters on the torn paper — and then she turned back to the shelf and began, carefully and methodically, to pull books.

She spent two hours in the study. She went through six volumes on undeciphered ancient writing systems — Linear A, Proto-Sinaitic, the Indus Valley script, Rongorongo, the Voynich manuscript — photographing relevant pages, comparing characters, ruling out and moving on. She was looking for something that shared the structural logic of the script on the torn paper: the way it combined flowing cursive strokes with precise angular underpinning, the specific proportions of the characters, the apparent left-to-right direction of the text.

She didn't find a match. But she found something almost as useful: a footnote, on page 247 of a dense academic text titled *Lost Languages and Living Archives*, that referenced a private collection held at the Morrow Archive — a specialist library on the eastern edge of the city — that was described as containing "several examples of writing systems not yet formally catalogued in academic literature."

Not yet formally catalogued.

Nora read the footnote three times. Then she took a photograph of it, replaced the book on the shelf, and went to get her coat.

The Morrow Archive was not the kind of place you stumbled across. It occupied the ground floor of a narrow Victorian building on a street that most mapping applications either mislabelled or omitted entirely, sandwiched between a locksmith and a shop that appeared to sell exclusively antique barometers. There was no sign outside. The only indication that it was a library at all was a small brass plate beside the door that read, in letters worn nearly smooth with age: *MORROW ARCHIVE — BY APPOINTMENT*.

Nora did not have an appointment.

She tried the door anyway. It was unlocked.

Inside was the smell of old books taken to its logical extreme — not unpleasant, but almost overwhelming, like stepping into the past through the medium of paper and dust. The entrance room was lined with shelves that ran up to a ceiling so high the upper shelves were lost in shadow. A wooden desk sat near the door, and behind it, arranged in an armchair with the settled comfort of someone who had occupied it for decades, was an elderly man.

He was perhaps seventy, small and neat, with white hair that stood up slightly at the crown as though it had opinions about direction, and a pair of reading glasses perched on his nose that he was looking over rather than through. He was reading

something, and he finished the paragraph before he looked up, which Nora respected.

"We're by appointment," he said, pleasantly but with the precision of someone who meant it.

"I know," Nora said. "I'm sorry. I don't have one."

"Then you'll need to make one." He returned to his book. "The number is on the website."

"I couldn't find a website."

He looked up again, with an expression that suggested this was by design. He **scrutinized** her over his glasses with the careful attention of someone assessing a text of uncertain provenance — looking for authenticity, or perhaps for something else. Whatever he found appeared to satisfy him marginally, because he did not immediately repeat his instruction.

"You're rather young to be interested in the Archive," he said.

"My brother is missing," Nora said. She had decided, on the bus over, that directness was the most efficient approach. "He disappeared two nights ago. I found something in his room that I think might be connected, and I can't identify it anywhere else, and the footnote in *Lost Languages and Living Archives* said you have uncatalogued writing systems."

A pause.

"Professor Vale's daughter," the man said.

Nora blinked. "You know my father?"

"I know of him. He's published extensively on extinct dialects." He closed his book — she caught the title on the spine, something in Latin she couldn't parse quickly enough — and regarded her with an expression that had shifted from **reticent** assessment to something more complicated. Something that looked, if she was reading it correctly, like apprehension. "What did you find?"

Nora took out her phone and showed him the photograph of the torn paper — the text first, and then the symbol in the corner.

She watched his face carefully, because she always watched faces carefully, and what she saw made the cold feeling from yesterday come back in a rush.

He went pale. Not gradually, the way people go pale when they feel unwell, but sharply — a sudden draining of colour that left him looking like he'd seen something he had not expected and was not at all pleased about. His hand, which had been resting on the arm of his chair, tightened briefly on the wood.

Then he controlled it. He was good at controlling things, she could see that — there was a long practice of composure in the way he arranged his expression back into something neutral. But she had seen it. The half-second before he caught himself.

"Where did you say you found this?" he asked. His voice was carefully, **deliberately** calm.

"In my brother's room. On his desk."

"And your brother — Elias, is it? — he's a student?"

"He was about to start at Whitmore. He disappeared Monday night." She kept her eyes on his face. "You recognize the

symbol."

It wasn't a question. He knew that.

Mr. Voss — she would learn his name before she left — looked at her for a long moment over his reading glasses. Then he looked at the door. Then he looked back at her, and in his eyes was something she would later identify as the expression of a man making a decision he had been trying to avoid making for a very long time.

"Close the door," he said quietly. "And sit down."

Nora closed the door.

She sat.

SAT Words in This Chapter: tenacity · futile · assertive · multitude · indignant · reticent · deliberately

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Three: The Librarian Who Knows Too Much

Mr. Voss did not speak immediately.

He rose from his armchair with the careful deliberateness of someone who had learned not to rush, and crossed to the window that looked out onto the narrow street. He stood there for a moment, looking at nothing in particular — or perhaps looking at something very particular that Nora couldn't see — before he pulled the blind down with a soft snap and turned back to the room.

"Tea," he said. "I think tea first."

Nora, who was not especially interested in tea but understood that some people required ritual before difficult conversation, said nothing. She watched him move to a small electric kettle behind his desk, fill it from a bottle of water, and switch it on. He moved with the economy of a person who had done this in the same space so many times that the actions had become automatic, like breathing. While the kettle heated, he retrieved two cups from a low shelf — mismatched, one blue and one green — and placed them on the desk with the precision of someone setting a table for a formal dinner.

Only then did he sit, fold his hands in his lap, and look at her.

"My name," he said, "is Edmund Voss. I have been the curator of this archive for thirty-one years. Before that, I was a scholar of ancient and constructed languages at the University of Edinburgh, which is where I first encountered the subject we

are about to discuss." He paused. "How much do you know about secret societies?"

"Historically or currently?"

Something shifted in his expression — not quite a smile, but the suggestion of one. "Currently."

"Less," Nora said. "I know the general concept. A group that operates outside public knowledge, usually with a hierarchy, a founding purpose, and a mechanism for keeping membership secret. Usually in fiction they either run the world or are trying to." She paused. "I'm assuming you're going to tell me one actually exists."

"Several exist," Mr. Voss said. "Most of them are **mundane** in the extreme — gentlemen's clubs that like to feel important, alumni networks with rituals borrowed from older traditions. Harmless, largely. Self-congratulatory." The kettle clicked off. He poured water into both cups without looking away from her. "The one you've stumbled into is neither harmless nor self-congratulatory. It is, in fact, one of the oldest continuously operating organizations in the modern world, and it has gone to considerable lengths to remain entirely unknown."

He held out the blue cup. Nora took it.

"It's called the Unmarked," he said.

The name, by itself, told her nothing. She said so.

"That is rather the point," Mr. Voss said. He settled back in his chair with his green cup and regarded her with an expression

she was beginning to identify as his baseline: careful, slightly **apprehensive**, alert to things she couldn't yet see. "The Unmarked have no public name, no known headquarters, no listed membership. The name itself is internal — used only among those who belong. To the outside world, they simply don't exist."

"What do they do?"

"At their founding — and we are speaking of the early fifteenth century, best we can determine — they were scholars. Collectors of knowledge that the dominant powers of the time wanted suppressed. Religious texts, scientific theories, historical records that contradicted the official accounts of whoever happened to be in power." He turned his cup slowly in his hands. "They understood, earlier than most, that information is the most **perishable** of commodities. That the people who control what is known, control everything else. So they gathered what others tried to destroy and kept it safe."

"A secret library," Nora said.

"Among other things. Over the centuries they expanded — archivists became agents, scholars became operatives. They developed their own written language" — he nodded toward her phone, where the photograph was still visible on the screen — "which they called the **Codex Script**, used exclusively for internal communication. Untranslatable without their cipher, which they guard with considerable **vigilance**." He paused. "Your brother's paper is written in Codex Script."

Nora set her cup down. "So Eli was in contact with the Unmarked."

"More than in contact, I would think. The Codex Script is not something you stumble across. It exists in no public record. To have a document written in it, your brother would have had to have been brought inside — at minimum to the level of an initiate." Mr. Voss looked at her with steady, careful eyes. "Which raises the question of how a seventeen-year-old from this city came to their attention."

"Eighteen," Nora said automatically. Then: "He's exceptional. He speaks three languages, he's been accepted to Whitmore's early-entry program — "

"I know what Whitmore is," Mr. Voss said quietly.

Something in the way he said it made Nora go still. "What does that mean?"

He was quiet for a moment that felt longer than it was. "The Unmarked have, over the centuries, developed a particular interest in exceptional young minds. They have been known to identify candidates through academic institutions — schools, universities — and extend invitations to those who demonstrate the right combination of intelligence and discretion." He looked at his tea. "Whitmore University has a long and not entirely coincidental relationship with that process."

Nora thought about this. Her mind moved through it the way it always moved through new information — quickly, cataloguing, testing connections. Eli, applying to Whitmore. Eli, coming home for the holidays last spring already quieter than usual. Eli, spending hours in their father's study looking at books on ancient languages. Eli, writing *TONIGHT* in red on a Monday and vanishing before Tuesday morning.

"They recruited him," she said.

"That would be my assessment."

"And then he disappeared from inside the organization."

Mr. Voss looked at her sharply. "What makes you say that?"

"Because he left without his phone and his backpack," Nora said. "Eli doesn't forget things. He doesn't lose things. If he left without them, either he left in a hurry — which suggests he was frightened — or he left without choosing to. And the paper in his room wasn't his handwriting. Someone else put it there." She paused. "Was it a message? The text?"

"I don't have their cipher," Mr. Voss said. "I can read the script to some degree — enough to understand its structural logic — but not fluently. I can tell you the document is relatively short, likely a summons or a directive of some kind, based on its format. The symbol in the corner is a seal." He hesitated. "It's not a seal I've seen on Unmarked documents before."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it comes from a specific faction within the organization." His voice had gone carefully neutral in the way of someone choosing their words with great precision. "The Unmarked is not a monolith. It has divisions, competing interests. Most of them are — manageable. But there is a faction that has been growing in influence over the past decade whose methods and motivations are considered **nefarious** even by the organization's own standards." He met her eyes. "If that seal belongs to them, then your brother is in considerably more danger than a simple disappearance would suggest."

The word *danger* landed in the room with a weight that Nora acknowledged and set to the side, because acknowledging it fully right now was not useful. She could do that later, when she was alone and the thinking was done.

"How do you know all of this?" she asked instead. "You said you're a curator. You're not a member."

"No." He was quiet for a moment. "I was approached, many years ago. I declined. But I had already learned enough to understand what they were, and in the years since I have made it something of a private study." He looked around the archive — the towering shelves, the accumulated volumes of a lifetime's work. "Knowledge has a way of finding the people who are looking for it. Fragments surface. Documents pass through my hands. Former members occasionally seek a sympathetic ear." A pause. "Your father's work on extinct dialects has intersected with mine more than once, which is how I know his name. He has never known why certain of his academic inquiries met with quiet obstruction."

Nora stared at him. "The Unmarked interfered with my father's research?"

"In small ways. Nothing dramatic. Simply — certain archives became unavailable at certain times. Certain colleagues proved unexpectedly **reticent** to collaborate." He looked at her steadily. "They are **vigilant** about protecting their history. Your father got closer than most without knowing what he was close to."

The room felt different than it had when she'd walked in. Not smaller, exactly, but more loaded — as though the air itself had

weight now, pressed down by the **magnitude** of what he was telling her.

Nora breathed through it. In, out. Think.

"I need to find Eli," she said.

"Yes."

"Can you help me?"

Mr. Voss looked at her for a long time. His expression was the expression of a man conducting an internal argument — the careful, slightly pained look of competing obligations. She watched him work through it without pushing, because pushing was rarely the right tool when a person was making a genuine decision.

"I can give you information," he said at last. "I can tell you what I know about their structure, their known locations in this city, the names of individuals who have been associated with them over the years. I can help you understand what you're dealing with." He paused. "What I cannot do is accompany you. I am seventy-one years old and I have spent thirty-one years maintaining a very careful distance from the Unmarked, and I intend to continue doing so." He looked at her with something that was not quite an apology but was adjacent to it. "I am not a brave man, Miss Vale. I am an **informed** one. There is a difference."

"I'll take informed," Nora said.

He nodded, slowly. Then he set down his cup, opened the drawer of his desk, and removed a small leather notebook, which he placed on the desk between them.

"We should start," he said, "with what they want."

She was there for two hours.

By the time she left — stepping back out into the grey October afternoon with the notebook in her bag, a list of three names in her phone, and a considerably altered understanding of the world — the street was quieter than it had been when she arrived. The locksmith next door had turned his sign to *closed*. The barometer shop, she noticed for the first time, had a small handwritten card in the window that read *back in five minutes* in faded ink, which suggested it had been there for some time.

She stood on the pavement for a moment and let the cold air settle around her.

The Unmarked. Six centuries old, operating in the shadows of the modern world, with a presence in this city that Mr. Voss had described as *substantial and discreet*. Three known entry points to their underground network, though he had been careful to note that the network changed and what had been true two years ago might not be true now. A faction within the faction that had been moving against its own membership, and a seal that Nora now knew to associate with danger.

And Eli, somewhere inside all of it.

She thought about what Mr. Voss had said near the end of their conversation, when she'd asked him directly what he thought had happened to her brother.

He found something, the old man had said, with the quiet certainty of someone working from long experience. *That is the*

most perilous thing you can do inside the Unmarked. They value knowledge above everything else — but only certain people are permitted to hold certain knowledge. If Elias found something he wasn't supposed to find, and if the wrong people became aware of it —

He hadn't finished the sentence. He hadn't needed to.

Nora started walking. She had three names in her phone and a notebook full of information she hadn't finished processing, and she had the cold, focused clarity that came to her sometimes when a problem was serious enough to cut through everything else and leave only the essential question behind.

Eli was alive. She was certain of this in the way she was certain of things she couldn't entirely explain — the same instinct that had told her, standing in his doorway yesterday morning, that the stillness of his room was the wrong kind. She had been right about that. She intended to be right about this.

She turned up her collar against the wind and headed for the bus stop.

She had work to do.

SAT Words in This Chapter: apprehensive · perishable · vigilance · nefarious · reticent · magnitude · perilous

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Four: A Door That Shouldn't Exist

The first name on Mr. Voss's list was a woman called Adaeze Obi.

According to the notes he'd written in the leather notebook — small, precise handwriting that reminded Nora uncomfortably of Eli's — Adaeze Obi was thirty-four years old, a former Unmarked operative who had left the organization eight years ago under circumstances Mr. Voss described only as *acrimonious,* and who now ran a secondhand bookshop in the Aldgate district called *Marginalia*. She was, he had written, the most likely of the three names to actually speak to Nora, on the grounds that she had the least to lose and the most reason to want the organization's more troubling activities exposed.

The second name was a man called Peter Craine, described as a current mid-level member whose loyalty Mr. Voss considered uncertain. He had underlined *uncertain* twice, which Nora interpreted as a warning.

The third name he had written and then crossed out and rewritten, as though deciding at the last moment, and beside it he'd added a single word in brackets: *[careful]*. The name was Sable Morrow.

Nora had looked up from the notebook at that. "Morrow. Like the archive?"

Mr. Voss had been quiet for a moment. "The archive was named for my predecessor," he said. "Who was Sable Morrow's great-

grandmother." He left it at that, and something in his expression had suggested that further questions about Sable Morrow would not be productive just yet.

She started with Adaeze Obi.

Marginalia occupied a narrow shopfront on a side street that smelled of coffee and old paper, which Nora was beginning to understand was the **ubiquitous** scent of the world she was stumbling into. The window display was arranged with the cheerful disorder of someone who loved books more than they loved commerce — stacked horizontally and vertically, interspersed with small handwritten cards that read things like *staff favourite!* and *read this before you die (the book is that good, not a threat).* A small cardboard sign on the door said *open*, with the *o* drawn as a tiny surprised face.

A bell rang when Nora pushed the door.

The shop was longer than it looked from outside, the kind of space that seemed to expand as you moved through it, shelves jutting out at angles that created a series of small alcoves. There was music playing softly — something jazzy and old, the kind that belonged in a black-and-white film. At the back, behind a counter stacked with books awaiting pricing, a woman was writing in a ledger.

She was tall, with close-cropped hair and the posture of someone who had once been trained to stand a certain way and had never entirely lost the habit. She looked up when the bell rang, assessed Nora in the efficient, unobtrusive way of

someone accustomed to reading people quickly, and then looked back at her ledger.

"Browsing or looking for something specific?"

"Something specific," Nora said. She walked to the counter, because hovering at a distance seemed inefficient. "Are you Adaeze Obi?"

The woman's pen stopped moving. She did not look up immediately, which told Nora something. "Depends on who's asking."

"My name is Nora Vale. My brother is Elias Vale. He disappeared two days ago and I think the Unmarked are involved. Mr. Voss at the Morrow Archive gave me your name."

The pen went down. Adaeze Obi looked up.

Her expression was **inscrutable** — carefully blank in the specific way of someone who has learned to control their reactions, which is different from someone who has no reactions. Nora could see the reactions happening underneath: a rapid internal sequence of calculation, assessment, wariness, and something else she couldn't quite name.

"Edmund Voss," Adaeze said, "is a cautious man who does not give out names lightly."

"He said you were the most likely to talk to me."

"He was right. That's **annoying**." She looked at Nora for another long moment. Then she came around from behind the counter, walked to the front door, and flipped the sign to *closed*. "Come to the back."

The back of *Marginalia* turned out to be a small kitchen — two chairs, a table, a kettle that appeared to be in near-constant use based on the limescale around the base. Adaeze Obi put the kettle on without asking and sat across from Nora with her arms folded and her expression still carefully controlled.

"Tell me about your brother," she said.

Nora told her. She kept it precise and chronological — Eli's acceptance to Whitmore, the two weeks of unusual behaviour she'd noticed in retrospect, the disappearance, the torn paper with the Codex Script and the seal, the calendar with *TONIGHT* in red. She showed Adaeze the photographs on her phone.

Adaeze looked at the symbol for a long time.

"Where did you say this seal was?" she asked. Her voice had gone flat in a way that Nora had come to associate with people suppressing alarm.

"Bottom right corner. Mr. Voss said it belonged to a faction — he didn't name them, he just said they were considered dangerous even by the Unmarked's own standards."

Adaeze set the phone down on the table and looked at the wall for a moment with an expression that Nora could only describe as **conflicted** — the look of a person weighing two sets of obligations that were pulling in opposite directions.

"I left the Unmarked eight years ago," Adaeze said at last. "I left because I disagreed with the direction certain elements within the organization were taking. I have spent those eight years making a very deliberate effort to stay out of their affairs." She

looked back at Nora. "I run a bookshop. I mind my own business. I am, by any reasonable measure, none of your business."

"And yet," Nora said.

Adaeze looked at her with something that might, in better circumstances, have been amusement. "And yet." She reached for the kettle. "The seal on that paper belongs to a group within the Unmarked called the Redactors. They've been operating as a faction for about fifteen years, though their **clandestine** influence goes back further. Their stated purpose, within the organization, is the protection of the most sensitive archived materials — the things even the Unmarked at large aren't permitted to access."

"And their actual purpose?"

"Control." She poured two cups without asking about preferences, which Nora found she didn't mind. "The Redactors believe that the Unmarked has become too large, too diffuse, too prone to what they call *information leakage*. They want to consolidate — to reduce the membership, centralize the most valuable knowledge in a small inner circle, and eliminate anyone they consider a liability." She pushed a cup toward Nora. "Eliminate is a word I'm using **deliberately**. I want to be clear about what I mean by it."

The kitchen was very quiet.

"How many people?" Nora asked.

"That I know of personally? Four. That I suspect? More." She looked at her tea. "Your brother — if he was recruited as an

initiate, he would have had access only to the outer layer of the organization. Basic protocols, introductory materials, low-level archival work. The kind of thing they give new members to test their **discretion** before trusting them with anything significant." She paused. "For the Redactors to take an interest in him at that level, he would have had to have found something. Something he wasn't supposed to find."

"That's what Mr. Voss said."

"Mr. Voss is right about most things, in my experience." She said it without warmth but without hostility — simply an acknowledgement of fact. "The question is what your brother found. Because that determines where they'd have taken him and why."

"How do I find out?"

Adaeze looked at her steadily. "You go inside."

The two words sat in the air between them with a weight that Nora recognized as the weight of a threshold. Once crossed, certain things would be difficult to uncross.

"You mean the Unmarked's network," Nora said. "Their underground."

"There is an entry point in this district," Adaeze said. "There are three across the city, but this one is the most accessible and the least monitored — they've considered it low-risk for years because the street above it is unremarkable and the entrance requires knowing where to look." She paused. "I know where to look."

"Why would you help me?"

The question seemed to surprise her slightly — or perhaps it was the directness of it. She was quiet for a moment, turning her cup in her hands.

"Because the Redactors," she said finally, "are the reason I left. And because if they are taking initiates now — young people who've barely crossed the threshold — then they have become more **brazen** than I thought, and that concerns me considerably." She looked at Nora with an expression that had shed its careful blankness and become something more direct. "And because you walked into my shop and asked me a direct question, and I have a difficult time with direct questions. I always have."

Nora nodded. "Will you take me there tonight?"

Adaeze looked at her for a long moment. "I'll take you to the entrance," she said. "What you do after that is your decision."

They went at nine o'clock, when the street had emptied out and the cold had settled in properly. Adaeze moved through the Aldgate district with the **efficient** ease of someone who knew every pavement, every turning, every pool of shadow between the streetlights. She had changed into dark clothing — practical, unobtrusive — and she walked slightly ahead of Nora without looking back to check, which Nora found she didn't mind. She kept up.

The entrance was not what she had expected.

She had expected, in some half-formed way, something **dramatic** — a hidden door behind a bookshelf, perhaps, or a

trapdoor beneath a rug. What she got instead was a narrow alley between two buildings, easily missed if you weren't looking for it, that ended at what appeared to be a brick wall. Set into the wall was an old service door, painted the same colour as the brick, with no handle.

Adaeze crouched and pressed three specific bricks in a sequence that looked entirely casual — the kind of movement that would look, to anyone watching, like someone steadying themselves against a wall. There was a faint mechanical sound, barely audible, and the service door swung inward two inches.

"The interior layout changes periodically," Adaeze said quietly, standing. "But the entry protocol has been the same for years. They're **complacent** about the things they consider beneath notice." She looked at Nora. "Once you're inside, you'll encounter a corridor that branches at the first junction. Take the left branch. It leads to a common area where members gather — it's the safest place to be seen for the first time, because alone in a corridor is suspicious, but in a common area you can claim to be waiting for someone."

"And if someone asks who I am?"

"Tell them you're a new initiate. Don't volunteer the name Vale — your brother's disappearance may or may not be known to the general membership, but caution is wise." She met Nora's eyes. "Do you have a good memory?"

"Yes."

"Then memorize what you see. Don't write anything down. And if you feel, at any point, that you've been **compromised** — that someone is paying you the wrong kind of attention — leave. The

door opens from the inside with a standard lever on the left. Do not hesitate. Leave immediately and go somewhere public."

"Understood," Nora said.

Adaeze looked at her for a moment longer — a searching, **appraising** look that Nora held without flinching.

"You're remarkably calm," Adaeze said. It wasn't quite a compliment. It was more like an observation about an unusual specimen.

"I'm terrified," Nora said. "I'm just not going to let that be the most important thing in the room right now."

Something passed across Adaeze's face — brief, unguarded, and gone before Nora could fully catalogue it. "Your brother," she said, "must be rather something."

"He is," Nora said.

She pushed the door open and stepped through.

SAT Words in This Chapter: ubiquitous · inscrutable · clandestine · deliberately · discretion · brazen · complacent · appraising

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Five: The World Beneath

The first thing Nora noticed was the light.

She had expected darkness — or at least the dim, **labyrinthine** murk of somewhere that did not want to be found. What she got instead was warm amber lamplight, the kind that came from actual lamps rather than fluorescent strips, casting long shadows down a corridor that was wider than she'd anticipated and considerably more — there was no other word for it — *civilised*.

The walls were stone, old enough that the mortar between the blocks had gone dark with age, but the floor was clean flagstone and the lamps were mounted in proper iron brackets at regular intervals. The air was cool and slightly damp, the way underground air always is, with an underlayer of something she eventually identified as old paper — the same smell as the Morrow Archive, the same smell as her father's study, which meant whoever had built this place had filled it with books.

She let the door swing shut behind her. The mechanical click of it closing was very soft and very final.

Left branch at the first junction, Adaeze had said.

The corridor ran straight for perhaps twenty metres before it branched. Nora walked at a measured pace — not hurrying, because hurrying attracted attention, but not dawdling either. She kept her breathing even and her eyes forward and her peripheral vision active, cataloguing as she went. Two more doors on the right side of the corridor, both closed, both

unmarked. A noticeboard fixed to the wall between two lamps, covered in pinned papers — she caught fragments as she passed, enough to note that they were written in Codex Script, unreadable. A coat rack near the junction with three coats hanging on it, which meant at least three people were somewhere in this place right now, minus whatever they were wearing.

She took the left branch.

The common area opened up at the end of it, and for the second time in thirty seconds Nora revised her expectations entirely.

It was a library.

Not a library in the administrative sense — not shelves of reference materials arranged for efficient access — but a library in the older sense, the sense in which a library is a *room* before it is a collection. There were deep armchairs and long wooden tables and reading lamps that cast warm pools of light across their immediate surroundings, leaving the edges of the room in comfortable shadow. Three of the four walls were shelved floor to high ceiling, and the volumes on them were old — genuinely old, the kind that had cloth spines and no barcodes and the soft, rounded corners of books that had been handled by many hands over many years.

And there were people.

Six of them, spread across the room in various configurations of reading and conversation and quiet work. Nora took them in quickly and categorically — two older men playing chess at a corner table; a woman of perhaps forty writing in a notebook with the focused intensity of someone transcribing rather than

composing; a teenage boy reading in an armchair near the far wall who looked up when she entered, looked back at his book, and then looked up again.

Beside the teenage boy, perched on the arm of an adjacent chair with a cup of something steaming and an expression of comprehensive boredom, was a girl.

The girl was the first one to speak.

"New?" she said.

She was about Nora's age — perhaps a year older, seventeen or eighteen — with dark skin, natural hair pulled back with a clip that appeared to be losing the battle, and a leather jacket that had clearly been bought for function rather than appearance and had acquired significant **character** in the process. She was looking at Nora with the frank, assessing interest of someone who found most things dull and was cautiously revising that assessment.

"Just arrived," Nora said, which was both true and **ambiguous**, which seemed wise.

"Initiate?"

"Yes."

"Who brought you in?"

A brief pause. "I came through the Aldgate entrance."

The girl's eyes sharpened fractionally. "That's not what I asked."

The boy in the armchair looked up from his book again. He was lean and angular, with the kind of face that looked like it was

always on the edge of saying something **sardonic** — not unkind, but constitutionally incapable of taking things entirely seriously. He had a paperback novel folded open across his knee that Nora clocked as *The Count of Monte Cristo,* and the coincidence of it — Eli's favourite, read four times, battered copy on the shelf — landed in her chest like a small stone.

"She doesn't have to answer that," he said, to the girl, then looked at Nora. "She doesn't have to answer that. Give it a minute, Sable, you're doing the thing again."

"What thing?"

"The interrogation thing. It puts people off."

"It's an efficient way to gather information."

"So is being a person, occasionally."

The girl — Sable — looked at him with an expression that suggested this was a long-running argument they had both long since stopped expecting to resolve. Then she looked back at Nora. "He's Theo," she said, with the air of someone making a **concession.** "I'm Sable. We're not going to report you to anyone, if that's what you're worried about."

"I wasn't worried about that," Nora said. This was approximately true.

She sat in the empty chair across from them, because standing in a doorway was a good way to continue to be the most noticeable person in the room, and she had no interest in being noticeable. One of the chess players glanced at her briefly and returned to the board. The woman with the notebook didn't look up.

"I'm Nora," she said.

"What's your area?" Theo asked. He asked it with the casual ease of someone making conversation, but his eyes were more attentive than his tone suggested. "Languages, archival, field?"

Nora filed those categories away. "Languages," she said. It was the most plausible answer given her father's work, and the closest to true.

Something flickered in Sable's expression. "Unusual. Most initiates come in through archival. Languages track is more advanced." She tilted her head slightly. "Who's your sponsor?"

"Sable," Theo said.

"I'm not interrogating, I'm *orienting*. There's a difference."

"The difference is **negligible** from where I'm sitting."

Nora looked between them. "It's all right," she said. "I don't mind the questions." She minded the questions, but strategic **candour** was often more useful than deflection, because it created the impression of openness while revealing nothing that mattered. "My sponsor prefers to remain uninvolved for the time being. It's a complicated situation."

This, she had calculated, would read as either dramatic or **intriguing**, and either way it would redirect the conversation.

Sable's eyes narrowed. "Complicated how?"

"I'd rather not say yet." She met Sable's gaze steadily. "I'm sure you understand."

A pause. Then Sable sat back slightly, in the manner of someone choosing, for the moment, not to push. "Fine," she said, in the tone of someone for whom *fine* rarely meant fine. "Welcome to the Unmarked, then. The common room is open most hours. The restricted archive is the door at the far end — don't go in without clearance or you'll have an unpleasant conversation with Warden Croft, who is humorless in a way that borders on pathological." She gestured vaguely at the room. "The chess players are Aldis and Farrow — they've been here twenty years each and mostly ignore initiates unless you bother them during a game, which I'd advise against. The woman is Dr. Halloway. She's archival. She transcribes."

"What does she transcribe?"

Sable and Theo exchanged a glance — brief, communicative in the way of people who have spent a lot of time together.

"That," Theo said, "is a more complicated question than it sounds."

She stayed two hours.

She did not learn where Eli was. She had not expected to, not on a first visit. What she did was learn the **topography** of the place — the layout of the common room, the names and rough roles of its inhabitants, the rhythms of movement and attention that told her who noticed things and who didn't. She listened more than she spoke. She asked questions that seemed naive rather than pointed. She established, she hoped, the impression of someone new and slightly overwhelmed rather than someone looking for specific information.

Theo turned out to be sardonic on the surface and considerably more thoughtful underneath — the kind of person who used humour as a first line of **defence** and observation as a second, which Nora recognized because it was not entirely unlike her own approach. He had been in the Unmarked for two years, initiated through the archival track, and currently worked on what he described as *translation support,* which he explained with deliberate vagueness. He was seventeen.

Sable was the most interesting of the two — complex in ways that didn't resolve into a simple read, which Nora respected. She was clearly intelligent, clearly **vigilant**, and clearly operating with a set of internal priorities that she kept close. She asked questions but deflected equivalent questions about herself with an ease that suggested long practice. Nora noted this and filed it without drawing conclusions.

At one point, close to the end of the two hours, she managed to ask — casually, in the context of a conversation about the different tracks within the organization — whether there had been any recent changes in membership.

Theo shrugged. "There's always movement. People come and go."

"Anyone leave recently? Or — stop showing up?"

A fractional hesitation. So small she might have imagined it, but she hadn't. "Why?"

"Just orienting," she said, with a small smile, and saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

"There was someone," Sable said. She said it carefully, in the tone of someone deciding, in real time, how much to offer. "An initiate. Languages track. He was around for a few weeks and then — wasn't." She paused. "It happens. Sometimes people decide it's not for them."

"Was his name Eli?" Nora asked.

The silence that followed was very brief and very complete.

Sable's expression did not change, but her stillness had a different quality to it now — the stillness of someone who has just become very alert. Theo looked at his book and then at Nora and then at the far wall in quick succession, which was the behaviour of someone recalibrating.

"Why would you ask that?" Sable said.

Nora held her gaze. "Because I think we have some things to talk about," she said quietly. "But not here."

Another silence. Then Sable glanced at Theo, and some kind of **consensus** passed between them without words.

"Tomorrow," Sable said. "Noon. There's a café on Vessel Street called The Margin. It's not affiliated. It's just a café."

"I'll be there," Nora said.

She left shortly after, retracing her steps through the left-branch corridor, through the junction, back along the main passage to the service door. She pushed it open, stepped out into the cold alley, and let the door swing shut behind her.

The street was quiet. Adaeze was gone — Nora hadn't expected her to wait — and the alley was empty except for the wind and the distant sound of a bus on the main road.

She stood for a moment and breathed.

Inside her chest, something that had been very tight since Tuesday morning loosened very slightly — not because she had found Eli, she was nowhere near finding Eli, but because she had found people who had known him. Who had noticed when he stopped showing up. Who had, in Sable's careful, **guarded** way, acknowledged his existence and his absence in the same breath.

He had been real to them. He had been there.

She pulled her jacket closer and started walking toward the bus stop, already composing in her mind the list of things she needed to know by tomorrow noon.

It was a long list. She'd need to get started.

SAT Words in This Chapter: labyrinthine · sardonic · ambiguous · concession · negligible · candour · topography · consensus · guarded

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Six: The Café on Vessel Street

The Margin was the kind of café that had decided, at some point in its history, to commit entirely to a single aesthetic and had never looked back. Everything was dark wood and mismatched crockery and bookshelves that lined the walls not for decoration but because someone had actually read the books and wanted them nearby. The menu was written in chalk on a blackboard and changed, apparently, based on whatever the owner felt like making. The coffee was excellent. Nora arrived eleven minutes early, ordered something with oat milk, and took the table in the back corner with sightlines to both the door and the window, because she had been doing this long enough — four days, but an **eventful** four days — to have developed habits.

Theo arrived three minutes late. Sable arrived exactly on time, which Nora had somehow already expected.

They sat. A silence opened up between them that had a different quality from the one in the common room — less **guarded**, more complicated, freighted with the weight of whatever they'd each spent the night deciding.

Theo spoke first. "You're his sister."

It wasn't a question. Nora looked at him. "How did you know?"

"You have the same way of going still when you're thinking." He wrapped both hands around his coffee cup. "Eli used to do it. You'd ask him something and he'd just — stop. Like the question had gone somewhere internal to get processed." He paused. "I liked him. I want you to know that before we get into

all of it, because it's going to sound complicated and I don't want complicated to be the thing you take away."

"Thank you," Nora said. She said it simply and meant it entirely and moved on, because she could feel the emotion in the statement and she needed to hold it at arm's length for now. Later. "What can you tell me about what happened to him?"

Theo and Sable looked at each other. This, Nora was learning, was their primary mode of communication — a rapid visual **consultation** that covered significant ground in roughly two seconds.

"We don't know what happened," Sable said. "That's the honest answer. He was here, and then he wasn't, and when we asked about it we were told he'd left voluntarily. Decided the Unmarked wasn't the right fit." Her tone made clear what she thought of this explanation. "People do leave voluntarily. It happens. But Eli had been — " She paused, selecting her words with care. "He'd been excited. Genuinely. He found the work meaningful in a way that not everyone does, especially not initiates who are mostly doing **rudimentary** cataloguing and filing at that stage."

"He told me once," Theo said, "that it felt like everything he'd been interested in his whole life had turned out to be pointing here. Languages, history, his dad's work." He glanced at Nora. "He talked about your dad a lot. Professor Vale."

"Did he talk about the Redactors?" Nora asked.

The name landed differently this time than it had with Adaeze. Adaeze had controlled her reaction. Theo and Sable were younger and less practised, and what crossed their faces in the

half-second before they caught themselves was not controlled at all — it was something between **apprehension** and recognition, the look of people who have been trying not to think about a specific thing and have just had it placed directly in front of them.

"Where did you hear that name?" Sable said.

"Someone who used to be inside." Nora set her cup down. "I know they're a faction within the Unmarked. I know their seal was on the paper left in Eli's room. I know they've been — removing people. Members who found things they weren't supposed to find." She looked between them steadily. "I'm not going to pretend I have more information than I do or that I'm not frightened, because I am. But I need to know what you know, and I think you've been wanting to tell someone for a while."

Another one of their silent **consultations.**

Then Theo exhaled slowly. "All right," he said. "Yes."

What they knew, assembled between the three of them over the next ninety minutes, was more than Nora had expected and less than she needed.

Theo had been in the Unmarked for two years. He'd been recruited through a summer programme at his school — a cryptography and linguistics elective that had turned out, in retrospect, to be an assessment exercise. The students who performed above a certain threshold received a follow-up letter, printed on heavy paper with no return address, that explained

what the Unmarked was and offered an invitation. He had accepted without telling anyone, which he now acknowledged was not his best decision but had seemed, at seventeen, like the most interesting thing that had ever happened to him.

"The first year is mostly **orientation,**" he said. "History of the organization, protocols, basic Codex Script literacy — enough to read notices, not enough to decode anything sensitive. You do archival work. You catalogue, you transcribe, you fetch things. It's designed to build **deference** before it builds access." He turned his cup. "I didn't mind it. I liked the archive. I like old things in general."

Sable's entry was different, and she explained it with the slightly clipped efficiency of someone who had told the story before and preferred to get through it quickly. Her great-grandmother had been the original curator of the Morrow Archive — a name that made something click audibly in Nora's mind — and her family had maintained a **peripheral** relationship with the Unmarked across three generations. Not members, not exactly, but known to them. Trusted to a point. Sable had been approached directly at fifteen and had accepted not out of enthusiasm but out of a **pragmatic** assessment that understanding the organization was preferable to being subject to it without understanding it.

"It's useful," she said, in the tone of someone who has made peace with a complicated decision. "The access to the archive is genuinely extraordinary. There are documents in that collection that don't exist anywhere else in the world. If you care about history, about preserved knowledge — " She paused. "I care about those things. I keep caring about them even when the organization frustrates me, which is frequently."

"Tell her about the restricted archive," Theo said.

Sable looked at him. He raised an eyebrow. She looked at Nora.

"The door at the far end of the common room," Nora said. "Warden Croft, no entry without clearance."

"The restricted archive is where the most sensitive materials are held," Sable said. "Materials that the general membership doesn't have access to regardless of their level or tenure. It requires Warden-level clearance or a direct authorisation from the inner council." She paused. "Three weeks ago — roughly the last time any of us saw Eli — I arrived in the common room at about seven in the evening and found the restricted archive door open. Which it should not have been. And I found Eli standing in the doorway."

Nora went very still.

"He wasn't inside," Sable continued carefully. "He was standing in the doorway, with a document in his hand, and when he heard me come in he turned around and his expression was — " She stopped. "I've thought about this a lot. The word I keep coming back to is *devastated*. Not frightened, though I think he was frightened too. But primarily devastated. Like someone who has just found out that something they believed in completely is not what they thought it was."

The café noise — the coffee machine, the low murmur of other conversations — felt very far away.

"Did he show you the document?" Nora asked.

"No. He put it back immediately, which suggests he was aware he shouldn't have it. He said — " Sable paused. "He said, *I need*

to think about this. And then he said, *Don't tell anyone you saw me here*. And I didn't. And three days later he was gone."

"Did you tell anyone after he disappeared?"

"I told Theo."

"And Theo told me we should leave it alone," Theo said, without accusation. "Which I stand by, for the record, because the Redactors are not people you **casually** antagonise. But that was before his sister walked through the door."

Nora looked at the table for a moment. Processed. Reorganised.

"The restricted archive," she said. "What's in it? Generally — what category of material?"

"Historical records, primarily," Sable said. "Documents the Unmarked has collected or produced over the centuries that are considered too sensitive for general access. Internal correspondence. Membership records going back to the founding." She met Nora's eyes. "Records of people who were — removed. From the organization, and in some cases more completely than that."

"A record of what the Redactors have done," Nora said.

"Among other things."

"And Eli found it."

"And Eli found it," Sable said quietly.

The three of them sat with that for a moment.

Then Theo said, with the careful **pragmatism** of someone who processes difficult information through action rather than feeling: "So. What do we do?"

Nora looked at him. Then at Sable. She thought about Adaeze, who had left the Unmarked and opened a bookshop and drawn a very deliberate line around herself that Nora had crossed simply by walking through her door. She thought about Mr. Voss, who had spent thirty-one years being informed rather than brave and had given her a notebook and three names and the most useful two hours of her week. She thought about her parents at home, her mother making spreadsheets and her father looking at paragraphs without reading them.

She thought about Eli, standing in a doorway with a document in his hand and an expression that Sable had spent three weeks trying to find the right word for.

Devastated. Because something he had believed in completely was not what he thought.

"We go back in," Nora said. "And we find out what was in that document."

They stayed another hour, planning.

It was, Nora thought, a slightly **unlikely** planning session — a girl who had been inside the Unmarked for four days total, a boy who had been there two years and consistently prioritised **self-preservation** over **confrontation**, and a girl whose relationship with the organization was described by her own family history and who was, behind the careful composure,

furious about it in a way she hadn't yet fully acknowledged. They were not, by any rational assessment, a formidable team.

But they were what she had. And they were more than she'd had yesterday.

Theo knew the common room's rhythms well enough to identify the periods of lowest activity — early afternoons on weekdays, when most members were at work or study. Sable knew the restricted archive's door mechanism from her three weeks of **surreptitious** observation: it was a combination lock with a six-symbol Codex sequence, changed monthly, and she had managed to observe the last change being made through a partially open door and had memorised the sequence. Whether it had been changed since was uncertain.

"When was it last changed?" Nora asked.

Sable thought. "The nineteenth. It's been just over two weeks."

"Monthly," Theo said. "So we have maybe a week before it resets."

"Then we go tomorrow," Nora said.

Theo looked at her. "You've been in there once."

"Which means I know the layout and two people who will vouch for my presence." She met his eyes. "I'm not suggesting we do this carelessly. I'm suggesting we do it before our window closes."

Another silence. Then Theo looked at Sable. Sable looked at Nora.

"Tomorrow afternoon," Sable said. "Two o'clock. The warden changes shift at two-fifteen, which gives us a gap of perhaps ten minutes where neither the outgoing nor incoming warden is paying close attention to anything." She paused. "It's not a large window."

"It's enough," Nora said.

She said it with more confidence than she entirely felt, which was, she had discovered over the past four days, a surprisingly useful thing to be able to do.

SAT Words in This Chapter: consultation · rudimentary · apprehension · deference · peripheral · pragmatic · surreptitious · confrontation · formidable

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Seven: The Restricted Archive

They went in at two o'clock exactly.

Nora had spent the morning doing the things that needed doing regardless of what the afternoon held — eating breakfast, reassuring her mother that she was fine, sitting with her father for twenty minutes in his study while he pretended to read and she pretended not to notice that he wasn't. The police had called with an update that was not an update: they were pursuing several lines of inquiry, they would be in touch, these things took time. Her mother had thanked them with the **implacable** courtesy she used when she was furious and needed to remain functional.

Nora had gone upstairs, sat on her bed, and gone through everything she knew in the methodical way she went through problems — not looking for what was missing, but checking what was there. By the time she left the house at one-thirty, she had a clear picture of what she was walking into and a clear set of priorities for the ten minutes she'd been given.

Theo and Sable were already in the common room when she arrived. Theo was in his usual armchair, reading, or appearing to read. Sable was at one of the long tables with a notebook, doing the same. Neither of them looked at her when she came in, which was correct — drawing attention to the fact that they knew each other was the last thing any of them needed right now.

Nora took a chair near the shelves on the north wall and opened a book she chose at random — something in French, which she couldn't read, but which gave her a reason to hold something and look occupied. She read the same paragraph of incomprehensible French seventeen times over the next forty minutes and thought about what she was going to do.

At five past two, Warden Croft appeared from the corridor that led to the restricted archive. He was a thick-set man of around fifty with the **dour** expression of someone who had decided, some years ago, that the world was **mediocre** and had yet to be proven wrong. He crossed the common room without looking at anyone in particular, took his coat from the rack near the entrance, and left.

Theo turned a page.

Sable made a note in her notebook.

Nora counted to thirty, watching the corridor.

No one came down it. The common room's other inhabitants — two today, an older woman and a man she hadn't seen before — were absorbed in their respective tasks and paying no attention to anything else. The noticeboard near the junction rustled in a draught from somewhere. The lamps burned steadily.

At thirty, she stood, replaced the French book on the shelf, and walked — unhurriedly, with the **nonchalant** ease of someone who had every right to be where she was going — toward the far end of the room.

She heard, rather than saw, Theo and Sable fall in behind her.

The door to the restricted archive was heavier than it looked — solid wood reinforced with iron, the kind of door that had been built to last several centuries and was **succeeding.** The combination lock was set into the wall beside it rather than the door itself: a panel of engraved symbols in Codex Script, twelve in total, arranged in a three-by-four grid.

Sable stepped forward without hesitation. Her fingers moved across the panel in a six-symbol sequence — fluid, memorised, performed with the **precision** of someone who had rehearsed it internally many times. The lock made a sound like a held breath being released, and the door swung inward.

"Nine minutes," Theo said quietly, checking his watch.

They went in.

The restricted archive was smaller than the common room and felt it — a lower ceiling, closer walls, the air noticeably cooler and drier, the way archival air is kept to **preserve** what it contains. The shelves here were different from those outside: metal rather than wood, with labels in Codex Script and small numerical codes that meant nothing to Nora but clearly formed a system. Document boxes lined most of the shelves. Some were very old — leather, hand-stitched, the kind of containers that predated modern archival practice. Others were newer, standardised, the kind you could order in bulk.

And in the centre of the room, on a reading stand that looked as though it had been purpose-built for something considerably heavier, was a large bound volume.

Sable crossed to the shelves immediately and began moving along them in a systematic way, reading the codes. Theo positioned himself near the door, watching the corridor through the gap they'd left it open. Nora went to the reading stand.

The volume was open. Whether it had been left that way deliberately or by someone who had been interrupted, she couldn't tell. The pages were heavy, the text handwritten in a formal version of the Codex Script that she was beginning, in a small and functionally useless way, to recognise the shape of even if she couldn't read it. Each entry appeared to follow a consistent format — a heading, several lines of text, and a date in the lower margin.

She photographed every visible page. Then she turned carefully back several pages and photographed those too, working quickly, aware of Theo's presence at the door like a metronome marking time.

"Six minutes," he said.

She turned to the most recent entries. The dates in the margins were in a numeral system she couldn't read either — she photographed those and made a mental note to ask Theo, who had two years of Codex literacy on her.

Then she turned one more page and stopped.

At the top of the entry, in addition to the standard Codex heading, there was a name written in ordinary Roman letters.

Elias Vale.

The entry below the name was in Codex Script. She photographed it three times from different angles to ensure

clarity. Her hands were entirely steady, which she noted with a distant, **analytical** detachment — the part of her brain that observed her own functioning as though from a slight remove had clocked this as significant and was filing it away.

Eli's name. In the restricted archive. In what Mr. Voss had described as a record of people who had been removed.

She turned the page.

The next entry had a name she didn't recognise. The one after that had another. She photographed them both and kept going — five more entries, each with a Roman-letter name above the Codex text, each with a date in the margin. Seven names total, including Eli's, spread across what appeared to be the last three months.

"Four minutes," Theo said. His voice was very level, which Nora appreciated.

"Almost done," she said.

She turned back to Eli's entry and looked at it one more time, as though looking harder would make the Codex Script **legible** by sheer force of will. It didn't, obviously. But the format — heading, text, date, and then, at the very bottom of his entry, something she hadn't noticed on first pass — gave her something.

At the bottom of Eli's entry, beneath the date, was a single additional line. Shorter than the rest. And beside it, stamped in the same red ink as the seal on the torn paper in his room, was the mark of the Redactors.

She photographed it.

"Three minutes," Theo said, with a slight change in his tone that she recognised as the beginning of **urgency.**

"Going," Nora said.

She stepped back from the reading stand. Sable was already at the door — she'd found something on the shelves and photographed it herself, a document box she'd taken down and replaced carefully, and her expression was the **controlled** version of something much less controlled underneath.

They filed out. Sable pulled the door shut. The lock clicked back into place with the same soft, definitive sound.

They separated immediately — Sable back to her table, Theo to his armchair, Nora to the French book on the north shelf. She stood with her back to the room and her face to the shelves and breathed, slowly and deliberately, until her heartbeat returned to something **equable.**

Two minutes later, the new warden came down the corridor.

He was younger than Croft, unfamiliar to Nora. He glanced across the common room — four occupants, apparently undisturbed, apparently absorbed — and went to his post near the restricted archive door without comment.

Nora turned a page of the French book.

They left separately and met fifteen minutes later at the far end of Vessel Street, away from The Margin, in a spot Theo had chosen for its **dearth** of foot traffic and its distance from any Unmarked-adjacent location he was aware of.

The October cold had sharpened over the course of the afternoon. Nora stood with her hands in her pockets and watched their faces as Sable spoke first.

"I found a personnel file," Sable said. Her voice was **taut** — not quite controlled, closer to the surface than her usual composure. "My name is in it. And Theo's."

Theo's expression did not change, which meant something. "Doing what?"

"Flagged for **surveillance.** Active since three weeks ago." She met his eyes. "Since Eli disappeared."

"They know we knew him," Theo said. Not a question.

"They're watching to see if we do anything about it." She looked at Nora. "Which means walking into that archive today was — "

"A risk," Nora said. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Theo said, surprising her slightly. "We chose to come in. That's different from being pulled in." He looked at Sable. "And we already knew something was wrong. We'd just been pretending we didn't."

Sable looked at him for a moment. Then she looked at her feet. Then she looked up. "Yes," she said, with the **candour** of someone removing something they'd been carrying for a while. "We had."

"I found a list of names in that archive," Nora said. "Seven of them. Eli's was one. All with the Redactor seal at the bottom of the entry." She looked at them. "I need someone who can read

Codex Script to tell me what those entries say. Can either of you — "

"I can try," Theo said. "I'm not fluent. But basic Codex, yes."

"Then that's our next step." She took her phone out and held up the photographs. "Tonight, if possible."

Theo and Sable looked at the screen. Theo's eyes moved across the photographed text with the careful, slightly laboured attention of someone reading in a second language — slowly, working out each symbol. His expression as he read shifted through several states that Nora catalogued quickly: recognition, **confusion**, and then, arriving last and sitting heaviest, something she could only describe as **dismay.**

"What does it say?" she asked.

He looked up. "It says — " He stopped. Started again. "The heading is a classification. *Acquired* is the closest translation. And then a brief description of — of what he found." He paused. "And then at the bottom. The last line."

"What does the last line say?"

Theo looked at her with the expression of someone who very much did not want to be the one to say the next thing.

"*Containment in progress,*" he said.

The street was very quiet. A bus passed at the far end, its windows lit and warm against the darkening afternoon.

Nora looked at the words on her phone screen — the last line of Eli's entry, the Redactor seal beside it — and let the meaning of

containment settle into her understanding completely, without **mitigating** it or softening its edges.

Then she put her phone in her pocket.

"Right," she said. "Then we need to move faster."

SAT Words in This Chapter: implacable · dour · nonchalant · analytical · legible · equable · dearth · taut · candour · dismay · mitigating

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Eight: Seven Names

They went to Theo's flat.

It was the most **pragmatic** option — his parents were both at work until six, it was twenty minutes from Vessel Street, and he had, spread across his desk in a configuration that looked chaotic but apparently wasn't, a set of Codex Script reference materials that he described as his personal study notes from two years of membership. He had, it emerged, been teaching himself the script beyond the basic level the Unmarked provided to initiates, in the quiet, **industrious** way of someone who collects knowledge the way others collect objects — not for display, but because the having of it felt necessary.

The flat was on the fourth floor of a building that smelled of cooking from multiple countries simultaneously, which Nora found oddly comforting. His room was what she expected: books stacked horizontally because the shelves were full, a desk that had long since given up being a desk and become more of a horizontal archive, a chess set in progress on a board balanced on a stack of hardbacks. A poster of a periodic table on the wall, which she hadn't anticipated.

"Chemistry?" she asked.

"Languages and patterns," he said, already sitting down at the desk and pulling the reference notes toward him. "Chemistry is just a very small alphabet with consistent rules. Sit somewhere."

Sable had taken the desk chair she found in the corner. Nora sat on the floor with her back against the bed — the most efficient

use of the available space — and pulled her knees up and waited while Theo spread her photographs across the desk beside his notes and began, with the careful, slightly **laborious** concentration of someone working at the edge of their competence, to translate.

He worked from left to right across each photograph, murmuring occasionally, making small marks in pencil on a spare piece of paper. Sable watched him with the focused patience of someone accustomed to waiting for things to be done correctly rather than quickly. Nora watched the window, where the afternoon was becoming evening in the slow, **imperceptible** way of October when the days were already short.

After twenty minutes, Theo sat back.

"All right," he said. "Seven entries, all the same format. Classification heading — *Acquired* — followed by a brief description of the subject. Then a status line at the bottom with the Redactor seal." He looked at his notes. "The descriptions vary. Some are straightforward — name, age, membership track, length of time in the organization. Others have an additional line I'm less certain about, a phrase that keeps recurring." He pointed to the pencil marks on his paper. "The best translation I can manage is something like *accessed restricted material* or *obtained classified knowledge*. The Codex vocabulary around this is specific in a way that suggests it's a formal category rather than a general description."

"They have a **protocol** for it," Sable said. It wasn't a question. Her voice had the flat quality of someone confirming something they'd suspected.

"They have a protocol for it," Theo agreed. "The status lines at the bottom are where it gets — varied. Most of them say *containment in progress,* the same as Eli's. Two of them say something different." He paused. "The phrase in those two is harder to translate precisely. The closest I can get is *containment complete*."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"Complete," Nora said.

"Complete."

She absorbed this. Set it where it needed to go in the structure of what she knew, and kept her voice level. "The six other names — can you read them?"

Theo turned back to the photographs. "The entries are in Codex Script throughout, except for the names. Like Eli's — they use Roman letters for the names, which is **anomalous** given that everything else is in Codex. My guess is that it's for cross-referencing with external records. Making it easier to identify specific individuals without requiring full Codex **literacy.**" He read from his notes. "The names are: Marcus Osei, Diana Fenn, Robert Achterberg, Yusuf Tadesse, Catherine Lyle, and — " He stopped.

Nora looked at him. "And?"

He looked up from the notes. He looked at Sable. "Adaeze Obi," he said.

Sable's composure, which was considerable and well-maintained, did something complicated at that. Not a crack, exactly — more like a **tremor** below the surface, the kind of movement that doesn't reach the face but changes the quality of stillness around a person.

"She told me she left eight years ago," Nora said carefully. "That she left voluntarily, under difficult circumstances."

"The entry is dated four months ago," Theo said.

They sat with that.

"She didn't leave voluntarily," Sable said. "Or — she may have tried to. But if she's in that record, they didn't let her." She looked at Nora. "Did she seem — when you spoke to her — did she seem like someone under **duress?**"

Nora thought about Adaeze in the back room of *Marginalia*, turning her cup in her hands, her carefully maintained composure and the **vigilant** way her eyes had moved to the door when the shop bell rang, as though expecting, always, someone she didn't want to see. The way she had flipped the sign to *closed* before they'd spoken about anything sensitive. The way she had drawn a very deliberate line around herself and her bookshop and said, *I intend to continue doing so* — with the emphasis of someone reminding themselves as much as stating a fact.

"Yes," Nora said. "I think she did. I think I just didn't have the frame for it at the time."

"We need to go back to her," Sable said.

"We need to go to Mr. Voss first," Nora said. "He needs to know what we found. He knows more about the Redactors' **methodology** than anyone else we have access to, and if Adaeze is in that record it changes the risk calculation for approaching her again." She looked between them. "Also, he can help with the Codex translation. He's been studying their documents for thirty years."

Theo nodded slowly. "Tonight?"

"Tonight."

Mr. Voss opened the door of the Morrow Archive at half past six, took one look at the three of them on his doorstep, and stood aside without comment.

The kettle went on. The blind came down. They sat in a different configuration than before — Theo had taken the chair Nora had used on her first visit, Sable stood near the shelves with her arms folded in the manner of someone who preferred to remain **ambulatory** during serious conversations, and Nora sat across from Mr. Voss and laid her phone on the desk between them with the photographs already open.

He looked at them for a long time. He did not go pale this time — he had the look, instead, of a man who had been **anticipating** something unpleasant and was now experiencing the moderate relief of having it arrive.

"You went inside," he said.

"Yes."

"And the restricted archive."

"Yes."

He looked at the photographs for another moment. "Give me your notes," he said to Theo, who handed them over. Mr. Voss read through them with the swift, **authoritative** attention of someone in genuine command of the material, making small sounds that conveyed neither approval nor disapproval but simply processing. He corrected two of Theo's translations in pencil, quietly, without comment. Then he set the notes down.

"The phrase you've translated as *containment in progress,*" he said to Theo, "is more precisely rendered as *subject secured pending assessment*. The **distinction** matters. It implies a holding state — they have the person somewhere, they haven't yet decided what to do with them."

"That's Eli's status," Nora said.

"Yes." He met her eyes. "Which means, as of the last date that entry was updated, your brother was alive."

Something moved through her — not relief, exactly, because relief required more certainty than this, but something adjacent to it. A **reprieve** from the worst version of what she'd been holding in the back of her mind since Tuesday morning.

"And the two marked *containment complete?*" she asked.

Mr. Voss was quiet for a moment. "Those I would rather not **speculate** about without more information."

"But you have a view."

"I have a concern," he said carefully. "Which I am choosing, for the moment, to hold."

Nora looked at him steadily. "Mr. Voss. My brother is in there somewhere. I need everything you know."

He looked back at her for a long moment, with the expression she recognised from her first visit — the man conducting an internal argument. This time the argument appeared to resolve more quickly.

"The phrase for *containment complete,*" he said, "has a secondary meaning in formal Codex usage. It can refer to the **termination** of a problem, in the way that bureaucratic language often uses neutral terms for things that are not neutral." He paused. "It can also refer to the successful suppression of information — ensuring that what a person knows cannot be shared. Memory **suppression** is something the Redactors have been rumoured to practise. It is, if true, considerably less **irreversible** than the alternative."

"Memory suppression," Sable said from the shelves. Her voice was very controlled. "Like what happened to the members who were — *silenced*. The ones you mentioned before. Their memories erased."

"The same principle, yes." Mr. Voss looked at her. "You are Sable Morrow."

A pause. "Yes."

"Your great-grandmother's name is on these walls." He gestured at the archive around them. "She was a remarkable woman. Considerably braver than I am." He looked at her with

something that was not quite an apology but carried some of its weight. "I should have contacted your family years ago. I chose **circumspection** instead. I'm not certain it was the right choice."

Sable held his gaze for a moment. "Tell me about Adaeze Obi," she said.

They were there for two hours.

By the time they left — stepping back into the cold street in a row, the three of them, with considerably more information than they'd arrived with and a weight of it that pressed differently on each of them — Nora had a clearer picture of what they were dealing with and a sharper sense of how little time they might have.

The Redactors, Mr. Voss had explained, operated on a **cyclical** pattern. Acquisition, assessment, resolution. The assessment phase — the *subject secured pending* phase — typically lasted between two and six weeks. After that, the resolution was determined by what the subject knew and whether it could be safely **neutralized** without more drastic measures.

Eli had been gone for just over a week.

"Two to six weeks," Theo said, on the pavement outside the archive. His breath misted in the cold air. "So we have somewhere between one and five weeks before they decide."

"Less," Nora said. "We have to assume they're aware the archive was accessed today. Which means they know someone is looking. Which **accelerates** their timeline."

A silence.

"Right," Sable said, with the clipped **resolve** of someone setting down everything that wasn't immediately useful and picking up the one thing that was. "Then what's next?"

"Adaeze," Nora said. "Tomorrow morning. And this time I'm going to tell her everything."

She started walking. After a moment, she heard their footsteps fall in beside her, one on each side, and did not look at either of them but felt, with a **clarity** that surprised her by its warmth, that she was no longer doing this alone.

SAT Words in This Chapter: industrious · laborious · imperceptible · anomalous · literacy · duress · methodology · ambulatory · authoritative · distinction · reprieve · circumspection · cyclical · resolve

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Nine: What Adaeze Knows

Marginalia opened at nine.

Nora arrived at eight fifty-five and stood across the street with her hands in her pockets, watching the shop through the thin morning rain that had been falling since dawn — the kind of rain that couldn't quite commit to being proper rain and settled instead for making everything slightly worse. The lights inside came on at eight fifty-eight. At nine exactly, the door sign flipped from *closed* to *open*.

She crossed the street.

The bell rang. Adaeze looked up from behind the counter where she was arranging something, saw Nora, and went still in the precise way of someone who had been expecting this and had been hoping to be wrong.

"I told you what I could," she said.

"You told me what you chose to," Nora said. "Which is different." She came to the counter. "Your name is in the restricted archive. In the same record as Eli's. Classified as *acquired*."

The silence that followed was the kind that has texture — not empty, but dense with things being processed at speed. Adaeze's expression moved through several states that she didn't fully manage to suppress: something sharp and quickly controlled, something **vulnerable** and quickly buried, something that settled, finally, into a **resigned** steadiness.

"Close the door," she said.

Nora closed it.

There were four of them in the back room this time: Nora, Theo, Sable, and Adaeze, arranged around the small table with cups of tea that no one was particularly drinking. Adaeze had looked at Theo and Sable when they'd come in — assessing, recognising something — and had said nothing until they were all seated.

Then she had said, quietly: "How much do you know?"

"Enough to know you haven't been free of them for eight years," Nora said. "And enough to know that whatever you're afraid of, it's more specific than a general fear of the organisation."

Adaeze looked at her hands around her cup. The composure she'd worn at their first meeting — the careful, **deliberate** armour of it — was still present but sitting differently now, like a coat worn against weather that had already gotten inside.

"When I left," she said, "I thought I was leaving. That's the **naïve** version of what happened." She paused. "What actually happened is that I found something I wasn't supposed to find — not in the restricted archive, I didn't have access to that — but in the general collection. A series of letters between members of the inner council going back forty years. Letters that made clear what the Redactors had been doing. What they had always been doing." She stopped. "I went to the senior archivist. I thought — I believed, at the time, that the organization as a whole wasn't aware. That it was a faction operating without **sanction.** That if the right people knew, it would be addressed."

"It wasn't a faction operating without sanction," Sable said. Not a question.

"The senior archivist was on the inner council," Adaeze said. "I understood this approximately thirty seconds after I finished speaking, when his expression didn't change at all." She looked at the table. "I was given a choice. Leave quietly, speak to no one, and be left alone. Or — not leave quietly."

"And you chose to leave quietly," Theo said. Without judgment — simply **establishing** the sequence.

"I chose to leave quietly," she agreed. "I was twenty-six. I had a life I wanted to keep." She looked up. "What I didn't understand until later was that *left alone* had conditions attached that I hadn't been told about. They monitor me. Have monitored me since I left. Not constantly, not **obtrusively** — just enough to ensure that I remain quiet. If I make contact with anyone connected to the Unmarked, or if I appear to be — " she paused, selecting the word carefully " — **agitating** in any way, the terms of my departure become significantly less comfortable."

"They're **coercing** you," Nora said.

"They have been **coercing** me for eight years, yes." She said it without self-pity, in the level tone of someone who has had a long time to make peace with a fact they don't like. "The archive entry you found — the *acquired* classification — that's their internal record of my status. I'm not a free agent. I'm a managed risk." She looked at Nora. "Which means that when you walked into my shop three days ago and I told you what I knew and showed you the entrance — " She stopped.

"You took a risk," Nora said.

"I took a significant risk. One I'm still not entirely sure about." She looked between the three of them. "And now you're back, and you've been inside the restricted archive, which means the Redactors know someone is looking, which means my risk has become considerably more — **acute.**"

"I'm sorry," Nora said. "I didn't know."

"You couldn't have known." She said it without softening it into reassurance, which Nora respected. "The question is what we do now."

What they did was talk for two hours, and what came out of those two hours was more than Nora had gathered in the entire previous week.

Adaeze knew things that Mr. Voss didn't — not because she was better informed in general, but because she had been inside in a way he hadn't, and proximity to an organisation reveals things that observation from a distance cannot. She knew the Redactors' **hierarchy** in the current period, as far as she'd been able to determine through careful attention over eight years. She knew the name of the inner council's current head — a woman called Vera Strand, who had been a senior archivist for thirty years and had **ascended** to the inner council a decade ago and had been quietly restructuring the Redactors' operations ever since. She knew that Vera Strand was **meticulous**, patient, and completely **convinced** of the **righteousness** of what she was doing, which Adaeze described as the most dangerous possible combination of qualities in a person with significant power.

"She believes the Unmarked's original purpose has been **corrupted** by expansion," Adaeze said. "Too many members, too much diffusion of sensitive knowledge, too great a risk of **exposure.** In her view, the organisation should be small, controlled, and absolute. The Redactors, under her leadership, are essentially implementing that vision — removing anyone who poses a risk, consolidating power in an inner circle of her choosing."

"And the people who've been — removed," Sable said. Her voice was careful. "The ones marked *containment complete.*"

"Memory **suppression,** in most cases. It's technically sophisticated and requires access to specific materials in the restricted archive — there are documents in there that relate to techniques developed over decades." She paused. "In some cases, I believe it has been more **permanent** than that. I can't prove it. I don't want to state it as fact. But I believe it."

The room was quiet.

"Where do they hold people?" Nora asked. She kept her voice even. "During the assessment phase — while they're deciding. Where are they?"

Adaeze looked at her with an expression that was **appraising** and sad in equal measure. "You think your brother is still in the assessment phase."

"Mr. Voss believes so. The entry was last updated six days ago."

"Six days is recent," she said slowly. "Assessment typically happens in one of two locations. There's a secondary site below the main network — deeper than the common areas, access

requires inner council clearance. It's used for what they call *secure consultation,* which is their **euphemism** for holding people who've found things they shouldn't." She paused. "The other location is outside the network entirely. A house in the north of the city that the Unmarked has owned since the nineteen-forties. **Ostensibly** a private residence. Actually a secondary facility."

"Which is more likely for someone in Eli's situation?" Theo asked.

"If they moved quickly after taking him — and they usually do — the secondary site below the network. It's more **accessible** and more secure in the short term." She looked at Nora. "But getting to it requires going significantly deeper into the underground than you've been. Past the common areas, past the restricted archive level, through sections of the network that are actively monitored."

"Can you tell us the route?"

"I can tell you the route I knew eight years ago," she said. "Whether it's still accurate — " She spread her hands.

"It's a starting point," Nora said.

Adaeze looked at her for a long, measuring moment. Then she stood, went to the shelf behind her where a row of notebooks stood in a careful line, and selected one near the end. She brought it to the table and opened it to a page that Nora could see was covered in a hand-drawn map — **meticulous**, detailed, annotated in small neat text.

"I drew this from memory two years after I left," Adaeze said. "I've updated it three times since, based on what I've been able to learn." She placed it on the table between them. "I've been keeping it in case I ever needed it." She paused. "I **hoped** I wouldn't need it."

They all looked at the map.

It was more complex than Nora had anticipated — branching corridors, multiple levels indicated by different colours of ink, annotations marking what appeared to be guard posts and monitoring points and locked junctions. The deeper sections of the map were less detailed, the lines slightly less certain, the annotations sparser.

"The lower level," Adaeze said, pointing. "Here. There are holding rooms here and here. No windows. One entrance and one exit, which are the same point." She moved her finger. "This junction is the critical one — it's the most heavily monitored point in the network. Getting through it requires either authorised access or — "

"Or what?" Sable asked.

Adaeze looked at her. "Or a **diversion** significant enough to pull the monitoring attention elsewhere." She paused. "I want to be clear that I am not suggesting I help you do this. I am giving you information. What you do with it is — "

"Your own decision," Theo said, with a slight smile that acknowledged he was echoing something she'd said to Nora earlier in the week.

Adaeze looked at him, and something shifted in her expression — a recognition, perhaps, or something **adjacent** to it. "You're very young," she said. Not unkindly.

"We are," Theo agreed. "But we're what's available."

She looked at all three of them. Nora held her gaze steadily.

"You're going to need a diversion," Adaeze said at last. "And you're going to need someone who knows what they look like from the inside, so you know when to move." She was quiet for a moment that had the quality of a decision being made and accepted. "I have spent eight years being a managed risk," she said finally. "I find I'm **exhausted** by it."

She looked at the map on the table.

"I'll help you," she said. "God help me."

SAT Words in This Chapter: vulnerable · resigned · naïve · sanction · obtrusively · coercing · acute · hierarchy · meticulous · righteousness · suppression · euphemism · ostensibly · diversion · adjacent · exhausted

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Ten: The Plan

They spent the rest of the morning at *Marginalia* with the map spread across the back room table and four cups of tea going cold at the corners.

Planning, Nora had discovered, was not a single activity. It was several activities happening simultaneously and occasionally in conflict with each other: **logistics** and psychology and risk assessment and the particular mental effort of trying to account for things you didn't yet know. She had done smaller versions of this her whole life — planning was just noticing applied to the future, tracing the probable shape of things before they arrived — but she had never planned anything with this many variables and this many consequences if she got them wrong.

Adaeze ran the session with the **authoritative** efficiency of someone who had done operational planning before and hadn't lost the instinct for it. She stood at the head of the table with a pencil and moved through the map **methodically**, layer by layer, beginning with what they knew and building outward toward what they'd need.

"The network has three functional levels," she said. "The surface level — the common room, the corridor from the Aldgate entrance, the restricted archive — is what you've seen. Below that is a secondary level that most members never access, used primarily for the inner council's meetings and secure storage. Below that is the tertiary level, which is where the holding rooms are." She marked each level on the map with a different symbol. "The transition between levels one and two requires an

access card. The transition between levels two and three requires an access card *and* a biometric — a handprint, on a reader that's been in place for about fifteen years."

"So we need a card and a handprint," Theo said.

"You need *access to* a card and a handprint. Which is different." Adaeze tapped the map at a junction on the second level. "This is where the monitoring is concentrated. Two **sentinels** — that's the Unmarked's term, I didn't choose it — rotate through this junction on a forty-minute cycle. During the changeover, which takes approximately four minutes, there is a window where the junction is either unmonitored or monitored by a single person who is occupied with the handover."

"Four minutes," Sable said. She was looking at the map with the focused attention of someone committing it to memory. "That's tighter than the archive."

"Significantly tighter," Adaeze agreed. "Which is why we need the diversion." She looked around the table. "The diversion's purpose is twofold. First, to extend the changeover window by pulling one of the sentinels away before the handover begins, giving us closer to eight minutes rather than four. Second, to create enough **ambient** disruption in the upper level that any unusual activity in the lower levels reads as connected to the disturbance above, rather than as a separate **incursion.**"

"What kind of diversion?" Nora asked.

"The restricted archive's alarm system," Adaeze said, "is connected to the same monitoring network as the sentinel posts. If the archive alarm activates — which it does if the combination lock sequence is entered incorrectly three times in succession —

it pulls at least one sentinel upward to investigate." She paused. "Someone needs to trigger that alarm deliberately, from outside the archive, and then be *visibly present* in the common room when the sentinel arrives, so that the alert appears to be an accidental triggering rather than a coordinated action."

"I can do that," Theo said.

Everyone looked at him.

"I know the combination," he said. "I watched Sable enter it. I enter it wrong three times, I'm sitting in my chair with my book when the sentinel comes up — it reads as an initiate who accidentally wandered too close to the panel." He shrugged, with the **nonchalant** ease of someone proposing something that was only moderately terrifying. "I've been coming to the common room for two years. I have **plausible** reason to be there."

"And if they don't believe it was accidental?" Sable said.

"Then I have a problem," Theo said. "But the **alternative** is that Nora and whoever goes with her have four minutes instead of eight, and four minutes isn't enough." He looked at Nora. "It's the right call. You know it is."

Nora did know it was. She also knew that knowing something was the right call and being comfortable with it were entirely different things, and she was not comfortable with it, and she was going to have to be anyway. "Yes," she said.

Sable's expression had shifted into something **conflicted** that she was managing with visible effort.

"The handprint," Nora said, redirecting. "How do we get through the biometric?"

Adaeze's expression did something **complicated.** "That," she said, "is the part of the plan I've been thinking about since last night." She sat down for the first time since they'd begun, which somehow made the next part feel more serious. "There is a member of the inner council who I believe is not aligned with Vera Strand's **agenda.** Has not been, for some time. I have been watching this person carefully for the better part of two years, and I believe — I cannot be certain, but I believe — that they are aware of what the Redactors are doing and find it as **reprehensible** as we do."

"Who?" Sable asked.

"His name is Peter Craine."

Nora went still. "That's the second name on Mr. Voss's list."

"Yes." Adaeze looked at her. "Edmund gave you his name because he had the same **intuition** I do — that Craine is the weak point in the inner council's **solidarity.** A person who has been inside something wrong for long enough sometimes reaches a point where the cost of silence becomes greater than the cost of action." She paused. "I think Peter Craine may be at that point."

"And if he is," Theo said slowly, "he can give us access."

"He has inner council clearance. He can get us through both transitions." Adaeze looked at the map. "The question is whether he will."

After Adaeze left them to open the shop — they could hear the bell and the **murmur** of customers from the back room — the three of them sat with the plan in the quieter way of people processing what they'd just agreed to.

Theo was the first to speak. "It's a good plan," he said. "**Objectively.**"

"It's the best plan available," Sable said. "That's not necessarily the same as good."

"In practical terms it is."

"In practical terms," Sable said, with a precision that had an edge to it, "we are proposing to approach a member of the inner council of the Unmarked, ask him to **betray** his colleagues and his access **privileges**, and trust him not to hand us directly to Vera Strand." She looked at Theo. "That is an enormous amount of trust to place in someone based on Adaeze's two-year **intuition.**"

"Do you have a better option?" Theo said.

"I'm not saying I have a better option. I'm saying we should be clear about what we're doing."

"We're trying to get Nora's brother back."

"We're trying to get Nora's brother back by taking a risk that could get all four of us **classified** in that archive," Sable said, and her voice was still level but the control it was taking was **audible** now, just beneath the surface. "I am not saying we shouldn't do it. I am saying we should do it with our eyes open."

A silence.

Nora looked at Sable. "You're right," she said. "About all of it. We should be clear." She paused. "Theo, Sable — if either of you wants to stop here, you should. You've already taken risks you didn't have to take. The archive, the surveillance flag — that's already more than I had any right to ask."

Theo looked at her with the expression of someone who found the suggestion mildly **offensive.** "I'm not stopping."

Sable was quiet for a moment. She looked at the map. Then she looked at Nora.

"I've known something was wrong for three weeks," she said. "And I've been sitting in that common room pretending I didn't." Her voice was very even. "I'm not interested in doing that anymore." She looked at Theo. "I'm not saying we shouldn't do this. I'm saying we do it carefully and we don't **romanticise** it."

"Agreed," Theo said.

"Agreed," Nora said.

The tension in the room — which had been **palpable** and specific, the tension of people under pressure finding the places where they naturally **diverge** — eased slightly. Not gone, but **acknowledged** and set aside, which was, Nora was learning, roughly what functional **collaboration** looked like under difficult circumstances.

"Peter Craine," she said. "How do we approach him?"

Adaeze had given them an address — not his home, but a coffee shop in the east of the city where she said he went most

mornings, alone, between eight and nine. A public place. **Neutral** ground.

"Tomorrow morning," Nora said. "Early."

Theo nodded.

Sable folded the copy she'd made of Adaeze's map — careful, precise folds, the map disappearing into a small square she put in her jacket pocket. "Early," she said.

She said it with the particular **resolution** of someone who has stopped arguing with a decision and started preparing for it.

That, Nora thought, was probably the best any of them could do.

SAT Words in This Chapter: logistics · methodically · sentinels · ambient · incursion · plausible · reprehensible · intuition · solidarity · privileges · romanticise · palpable · diverge · collaboration · resolution

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Eleven: Peter Craine

The coffee shop Adaeze had named was called Foundry, and it occupied the ground floor of a converted warehouse in the east of the city with the self-conscious **aesthetic** of a place that wanted to look like it hadn't tried very hard and had tried extremely hard to achieve this. Exposed brick. Edison bulbs. A menu written in three fonts on a piece of reclaimed wood. The coffee, Nora acknowledged, was genuinely excellent, which she noted because it seemed important to be fair.

She arrived at seven fifty with Sable. Theo was not with them — they had agreed, the night before, that three people approaching a nervous man in a public coffee shop was more likely to **intimidate** than persuade, and that Nora and Sable together struck a less **threatening** profile than any combination that included Theo's particular brand of angular wariness. Theo had accepted this **assessment** without argument, which suggested he agreed, and had gone to the common room instead to maintain their appearance of normal activity.

Peter Craine was already there.

He was in his mid-forties, **unremarkable** in the specific way of someone who has cultivated unremarkability as a professional asset — medium height, medium build, clothes that were good quality without being memorable. He sat at a corner table with a broadsheet newspaper and a flat white, and he read the newspaper with the careful attention of someone who was also watching the room, which Nora clocked in the first ten seconds.

He noticed them noticing him. She could see it in the almost **imperceptible** adjustment of his posture — a slight straightening, a controlled stillness that replaced the more relaxed position he'd been holding a moment before.

She went to the counter, ordered two coffees without consulting Sable, and carried them to his table.

"Mr. Craine," she said. "My name is Nora Vale. This is Sable Morrow. We'd like to talk to you about the Redactors."

She sat down. After a half-second, Sable sat down beside her.

Peter Craine looked at them both. His expression was **inscrutable** in the trained way — the look of someone who has spent years in an organisation that valued **discretion** above almost everything and had absorbed the habit of revealing nothing until they chose to. But underneath it, visible to Nora in the way things were usually visible to her — in the **minute** tension around his eyes, the way his hand on the newspaper didn't move but gripped very slightly tighter — was something considerably less composed.

"I don't know what you're referring to," he said.

"I think you do," Nora said. "And I think you've been waiting for someone to say that name in a context where you could respond honestly. I might be wrong. But if I'm right, then we have about fifteen minutes before this coffee shop gets busy enough that the conversation becomes difficult, and I'd rather use that time well." She paused. "Adaeze Obi sends her regards."

Something moved across his face at Adaeze's name. Not surprise — recognition, and something adjacent to relief, which

was what she'd been hoping for.

He looked at the table for a moment. Then he folded his newspaper with the **deliberate** neatness of someone buying themselves three seconds to make a decision.

"You're the girl whose brother disappeared," he said quietly.

"Yes."

He looked at Sable. "And you're Helena Morrow's great-granddaughter."

Sable's expression didn't change. "Yes."

He was quiet for a moment that stretched long enough to be **uncomfortable** but not so long that it became **intractable.** "How much do you know?" he asked, and the echo of Adaeze's first words to them was so precise that Nora wondered if it was something people inside the Unmarked were trained to ask, or simply the most **logical** question when someone arrived at your table knowing things they shouldn't.

"Enough," Nora said. "We know about the restricted archive. We know about the seven names. We know your name was on Mr. Voss's list as someone whose loyalty was uncertain, and we know Adaeze believes you've been **uncomfortable** with Vera Strand's direction for some time." She held his gaze. "We're not here to **expose** you. We're here because we need help getting into the lower levels, and you have the access that would make it possible."

Peter Craine looked at her for a long time. The coffee shop **hummed** around them — the machine behind the bar,

someone's laptop playing music too quietly to identify, the door opening and closing as the morning crowd began to thicken.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Sixteen."

He made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "And you walked into this coffee shop and sat down at my table and said the name of a classified internal faction." He shook his head, not in **disapproval** exactly but in the manner of someone **recalibrating** their expectations of what the morning was going to contain. "Your brother must have mentioned the family **disposition** for directness."

"He mentioned it was occasionally **inconvenient,**" Nora said.

This time it was closer to a real laugh — brief, quickly controlled, but genuine. It changed his face considerably. Made him look, for a moment, like someone who had not had much to find genuinely amusing in recent months.

"Elias Vale," he said, and his voice had shifted — quieter, more careful, with an undertone she hadn't heard in it before. "He was — exceptional. I want you to know I thought that. That he deserved better than what happened."

"Then help me fix what happened," Nora said.

He talked for forty minutes.

It came out in the **measured,** controlled way of someone who had been holding something for a long time and was releasing it carefully, with precision, making sure each piece landed

correctly before moving to the next. He was, Nora realised as she listened, the kind of person who had spent years being **meticulous** in the wrong direction — applying all his considerable care and intelligence to maintaining a silence he no longer believed in — and the effort of that had cost him in ways that were visible now, in the careful exhaustion of his manner and the **deliberate** quality of his relief.

He had been with the Unmarked for twenty years. He had joined for the same reasons most people joined — the archive, the history, the sense of being part of something that mattered. He had risen through the organisation on the strength of genuine ability and had reached the inner council eight years ago, the same year Adaeze left. He had known, by then, what the Redactors were. Had told himself it was **containable,** that the more **moderate** voices on the council would **prevail,** that Vera Strand's faction would overreach and be checked.

"She didn't overreach," he said. "She was **patient.** She moved slowly and built **consensus** and by the time I understood the full scope of what she was doing, the council was structured in a way that made **dissent** nearly impossible without **exposing** myself." He looked at his coffee. "I am not proud of the years since. I made the same calculation Adaeze made — survival over **confrontation** — and I have had considerable time to **interrogate** whether that was **cowardice** or pragmatism."

"Which was it?" Sable asked.

He considered this with the seriousness it deserved. "Both," he said. "In proportions I find **uncomfortable** to specify."

Nora looked at him steadily. "Eli found something in the restricted archive. Something significant enough that the Redactors moved on him within days. Do you know what it was?"

Peter Craine was quiet for a moment. "The Lexicon," he said.

Sable went still beside her. Nora kept her eyes on Craine. "What is the Lexicon?"

"It's a record," he said. "The most complete record the Unmarked has ever compiled. Going back to the founding — every action the organisation has taken that it could not acknowledge. Every person silenced. Every piece of knowledge **suppressed.** Every decision made in the inner council that would **destroy** the organisation if it became public." He paused. "It is, in essence, a complete **account** of every wrong the Unmarked has done in six hundred years. And it is kept in the restricted archive because it cannot be destroyed — it was written with materials that make it essentially **indestructible** — and it cannot be moved, because moving it would require **acknowledging** its existence to too many people."

"Eli found it," Nora said.

"Eli found it and read enough of it to understand what it was," Craine said. "And then Sable found him in the doorway, which I suspect he didn't account for, and within twenty-four hours the Redactors were aware." He looked at Nora. "I'm sorry. I knew he'd been taken. I didn't know who he was to anyone who would come looking."

"Where is he?" Nora asked.

"The secondary site. Level three, holding room four." He said it simply, without **prevarication.** "I checked two days ago, on a **pretext.** He's there. He's unharmed, as of two days ago." He met her eyes. "They're planning the memory **suppression** for the end of the week."

The end of the week was four days away.

Nora absorbed this. Held it. Set it where it needed to go.

"Will you help us?" she asked.

Peter Craine looked at his newspaper, folded neatly on the table beside his coffee cup. He looked at it for a long moment with the expression of someone saying goodbye to something — not the newspaper specifically but whatever the newspaper **represented.** The ordinary morning. The careful silence. The exhausting, **corrosive** work of knowing something was wrong and choosing, every day, not to act.

"Yes," he said.

He said it quietly and with the weight of a word that had been a long time arriving.

"Yes. I'll help you."

SAT Words in This Chapter: aesthetic · intimidate · assessment · imperceptible · inscrutable · minute · deliberate · intractable · recalibrating · disposition · meticulous · prevail · dissent · confrontation · cowardice · suppressed · prevarication · corrosive

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twelve: The Operation

They had two days to prepare.

Peter Craine had been precise about the window: the memory suppression procedure required a specific set of conditions — a practitioner, a preparation period, and a particular room in the tertiary level that was only made ready on scheduled dates. The next scheduled date was Thursday evening. It was Tuesday morning. That gave them forty-eight hours to plan, prepare, and execute something that none of them had done before, with a team that had never operated together under pressure, through a section of an underground network that three of them had never seen.

Nora found, to her own mild **astonishment**, that she was not frightened. She had expected to be — had anticipated the fear as a reasonable response to the situation — and instead found something that felt more like a very focused, very **acute** clarity. Everything peripheral had dropped away. What remained was the problem, and the problem was **tractable** if you broke it into its components and addressed them in order.

This, she was beginning to understand, was what she was actually good at.

They met that evening at Adaeze's shop — all five of them together for the first time, which created a particular **dynamic** that Nora spent the first ten minutes quietly mapping. Adaeze and Craine had a history that was visible in the careful way they

avoided looking directly at each other and then, when they did, held the look a moment too long. Something had happened between them that neither was going to explain and that Nora filed away for later. Theo, meeting Craine for the first time, was **cordial** in the specifically measured way of someone who was reserving judgment. Sable, also meeting him for the first time, simply watched him with the **unnerving** steadiness she brought to everything she considered important.

Craine appeared to find this **disconcerting**, which Nora thought was reasonable.

"The route," Adaeze said, spreading the map on the table. "Peter, correct anything I have wrong."

Craine leaned over the map. He made three small corrections with a pencil — a junction Adaeze had marked as monitored that had been moved, a door that had been added, a holding room number that had changed. Then he stood back.

"The monitoring at the level-two-to-three transition has been upgraded since you left," he said to Adaeze. "The biometric reader is still there but there's now a secondary check — a code that changes daily. I can provide that." He looked at the group. "I'll go in first, alone, on the **pretext** of a council matter. I'll get through the transition, disable the secondary monitoring on the tertiary level from the junction box inside — there's a panel, I know the **override** — and leave the door on the second transition unlocked."

"How long will that take?" Nora asked.

"Eight minutes, perhaps ten." He paused. "During which time Theo will have triggered the archive alarm and should be visibly

present in the common room, and Nora and Sable should be at the level-one-to-two transition ready to move the moment I signal."

"How do you signal?" Sable asked.

He held up his phone. "I send a message to Nora. The word *now*. Then I come back up and make myself visible on the upper levels — an inner council member investigating the archive alarm provides a **plausible** reason for my presence." He looked around the table. "Any questions about the route?"

"The holding room," Nora said. "Room four. What's the door?"

"Standard lock. I'll leave a key in the junction box on level two — there's a ledge inside the panel." He met her eyes. "He'll be alone in the room. They don't typically post a guard inside the tertiary level because they consider the transition points sufficient **deterrent.**"

"Typically," Theo said.

"Typically," Craine agreed, without **pretending** it was more certain than that.

They ran through it twice more. The second time, Sable interrupted at three different points with questions that were so precisely targeted at the weakest parts of the plan that Nora saw Craine look at her with an expression of **involuntary** respect.

"The signal failure scenario," Sable said. "If the message doesn't send — underground, signal is unreliable — how do we know when to move?"

"Nine minutes from when Theo triggers the alarm," Craine said. "If you haven't heard from me by nine minutes, assume I'm through and move anyway."

"And if you're not through?"

"Then you'll encounter a locked door on the second transition and will need to retreat before anyone comes to investigate the alarm." He paused. "The retreat route is the same as the entry route. Out through level one, through the Aldgate entrance, separate immediately and go somewhere public."

"The Aldgate entrance may be monitored if the alarm has been active for nine minutes," Sable said.

"It may be," Craine said. "It's still the fastest way out."

Sable looked at the map. "There's a second exit on level one — here." She pointed. "Closer to the common room. If the Aldgate corridor is compromised, we use this."

Craine looked at where she was pointing. "That exit comes out on the parallel street. It's less used but it's functional." He looked at Adaeze. "Is it still clear?"

"As of six months ago," Adaeze said.

"Then yes," Craine said to Sable. "That's the backup exit." He paused. "You're good at this."

"I'm good at finding the things that can go wrong," Sable said. "It's not the same as being good at this."

Wednesday passed in the **taut**, slightly **surreal** way of time before something **irrevocable.** Nora went home. She ate dinner with her parents, who were in the particular state she had come to think of as **suspended** — everything on hold, waiting, the ordinary rhythms of life continuing because they had to, because the alternative was simply stopping, and stopping wasn't something either of her parents knew how to do. Her mother had spoken to the police twice. Her father had gone into work for the first time since Monday and come home looking like he regretted it.

At the table, her father asked how she was spending her time.

"Reading," she said, which was true in a **peripheral** sense. "And walking. It helps."

Her father nodded. Her mother looked at her in the way she occasionally looked at Nora — not **suspicious**, exactly, but **perceptive** in the way of someone who knew their child well enough to know when a simple answer contained a more complicated truth, and was choosing, for now, not to push.

"We'll find him," her mother said. It was the thing she said every evening. She said it with **conviction** every time, which Nora thought was one of the more **formidable** things about her.

"I know," Nora said.

She went upstairs and sat on her bed and stared at Ohio on the ceiling and let herself, very briefly, be afraid. Then she put it away and went through the plan one more time in her mind, checking each component, finding the gaps and filling them with contingencies.

She fell asleep with her phone in her hand.

Thursday.

They gathered at Adaeze's shop at noon — a final check, a final run-through, a final exchange of looks between people who had arrived at the edge of something and were about to step over it. Craine was already there. He had the slightly **heightened** quality of someone operating on controlled adrenaline, which Nora found **reassuring** — it meant he understood the stakes, that this wasn't routine for him either.

"One thing," Adaeze said, when they had finished the last check. She looked at all of them, but her gaze settled on Nora. "When you find Eli — when, not if — he will not be the same as he was. Eight days in a holding room, knowing what he knows, having been taken in the way he was taken." She paused. "Don't expect him to be fine. Give him room to not be fine."

"I know," Nora said.

"Also," Theo said, with the timing of someone who understood when a room needed a small release of pressure, "if this goes wrong, I'm going to be very **aggrieved** about it."

Sable looked at him. "That's your contribution? *Aggrieved?*"

"I find it **motivating** to have something specific to feel," Theo said.

Nora looked at both of them — Theo with his **sardonic** composure, Sable with her controlled precision — and felt something that was not quite affection but was **proximate** to

it, the feeling of having found, in the most **improbable** circumstances, people who were exactly what the situation required.

"Right," she said. "Let's go."

They separated at the end of Adaeze's street.

Theo went ahead. He had his book under his arm and his phone in his pocket and the particular expression of someone performing **nonchalance** so well it had become almost real. He turned the corner without looking back.

Sable and Nora followed three minutes later.

They entered through the Aldgate service door at one forty-five. The corridor was quiet. The common room, when they reached it, had three people in it — Theo already settled in his chair, the woman who transcribed, and an older man Nora didn't recognise who was asleep in an armchair near the east wall.

Craine was not in the common room. He had gone in twenty minutes earlier.

Nora and Sable moved to the north end of the room, near the shelf where Nora had stood with the French book on the first night, and waited. Nora held a book she wasn't reading. Sable stood beside her with the map memorised and her arms at her sides and her expression entirely calm in the way of someone who had decided to be calm and was **executing** that decision with full commitment.

At one fifty-three, Theo stood up from his armchair, stretched — **casually**, **convincingly** — and walked toward the restricted archive.

Nora watched him enter the wrong combination. Once. Twice. A third time.

The alarm, when it came, was not loud. It was more of a sustained, low tone that was almost **subliminal** — felt as much as heard, the kind of sound designed to alert people inside the network rather than outside. She watched Theo's expression register **theatrical** surprise, watched him step back from the panel with his hands up slightly in the **instinctive** gesture of someone who has accidentally done something they didn't mean to.

Thirty seconds later, one of the sentinels came down the level-two corridor at a pace that was brisk but not running — alert, **purposeful.**

Theo was back in his armchair. He looked up at the sentinel with an expression of **genuine-seeming contrition.** "I'm sorry — I think I accidentally touched the panel. I was reaching for the shelf beside it."

The sentinel looked at him. Looked at the panel. Looked at the common room.

Nora was looking at her book.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Now.

She touched Sable's arm. They walked toward the level-two corridor.

SAT Words in This Chapter: astonishment · tractable · dynamic · cordial · disconcerting · irrevocable · suspended · conviction · formidable · heightened · aggrieved · proximate · improbable · subliminal · contrition · purposeful

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Thirteen: Level Three

The level-two corridor was darker than level one.

Not dramatically darker — the same iron lamp brackets, the same amber light — but the intervals between lamps were wider, and the walls were closer, and the stone felt older in a way that Nora couldn't have explained **rationally** but felt in the back of her teeth. The air was colder. The floor sloped downward at a **subtle** angle that you noticed only after thirty seconds of walking, when you realised your weight had shifted forward.

Sable moved beside her without speaking. They had agreed on silence below level one — not because speech was necessarily dangerous, but because silence kept them focused and focus was the thing they could least afford to lose right now.

The level-one-to-two transition had been exactly as Craine described: a card reader on the left side of a reinforced door, a daily code on a panel beside it. Craine had sent the code in a message forty minutes before they entered — a six-digit number that Nora had memorised and then deleted. The door had opened without resistance. The secondary monitoring, whatever it consisted of, had shown no sign of activity. Either Craine had disabled it as planned, or it had never been triggered.

She was operating on the assumption that everything had gone according to plan. The alternative — that something had gone wrong and they were walking into a monitored corridor — was

not a **productive** thing to carry right now. She noted it, assigned it a probability she considered low, and set it aside.

Eight minutes from the alarm. They had used two getting to the transition. Six remained.

"Junction," Sable said, very quietly.

Nora saw it: the corridor branched fifteen metres ahead, exactly as marked on the map. Left branch led to the inner council meeting rooms and the storage that constituted most of level two. Right branch led to the level-two-to-three transition and, beyond it, the tertiary level.

They took the right branch.

The junction box was where Craine had said it would be — set into the wall three metres before the second transition, a panel of dull grey metal with a latch rather than a lock. Nora opened it. On the small ledge inside, as promised, was a key: old-fashioned, iron, the kind that looked like it belonged to a different century but worked in a very specific lock. She took it and closed the panel.

The second transition door was unlocked. Craine had been through.

She pushed it open.

Level three was colder still and considerably quieter — the **absolute** quiet of a space that had been deliberately **insulated** from the sounds of everything above it. The corridor here was narrower than either of the previous levels, the ceiling lower,

the lamps fewer. It felt, in a way that the upper levels hadn't, like somewhere that had been built not for people to inhabit but for things to be kept.

The holding rooms were on the left side of the corridor. Numbered, in Roman numerals, on small iron plates beside each door. I, II, III, IV.

Room four.

Nora went to it. The lock was where Craine had said — a keyhole below the handle, old iron like the key itself. She fitted the key. Turned it. The lock gave with a sound that felt very loud in the silence and certainly wasn't.

She pushed the door open.

The room was small. A cot, a chair, a lamp on a small table that was the only source of light. A shelf with a water jug and a cup. No window, which she had expected — they were well below the street.

And Eli.

He was sitting on the cot with his back against the wall and his knees drawn up, reading — which was so entirely, **characteristically** him that for a moment Nora couldn't speak. He looked up when the door opened.

He stared at her.

She had prepared, on the walk down, for a version of Eli that was diminished — frightened, broken, altered by eight days of **confinement** in a stone room. What she found was something

more **complicated** than that. He was pale and thinner than she remembered and there was a quality to his stillness that was different from his usual stillness — more **vigilant**, less at ease, the stillness of someone who had been listening for sounds in the corridor for days and had trained themselves into a state of constant readiness. But his eyes, when they met hers, were entirely clear.

"Nora," he said.

"Hi," she said.

A pause that contained approximately eight days' worth of things neither of them said.

"How," he said.

"Later," she said. "We have about four minutes. Can you walk?"

He was on his feet before she finished the sentence. "Yes." He looked past her at Sable in the doorway. "Sable."

"Hello, Eli," Sable said, with the **equanimity** of someone greeting a person they'd last seen under entirely different circumstances. "We should move."

They were forty seconds from the holding room when the light in the corridor changed.

It was **subtle** — a slight **fluctuation** in the lamp nearest the level-three-to-two transition, the kind of thing you'd miss if you weren't paying close attention to your environment. Nora was always paying close attention to her environment.

She stopped.

Sable stopped beside her. Eli, half a step behind, stopped too.

Nora looked at the transition door. It was closed — she hadn't closed it when they came through, which meant someone had closed it after them.

"Back," she said, very quietly.

"The exit — " Sable began.

"Is behind that door and someone is between us and it. Back." She was already moving, reversing direction down the corridor, her mind running the map in parallel — level three, one entrance and one exit, the same point, Adaeze had said, and she had noted it then as the most **vulnerable** aspect of the plan and now here it was, **manifesting.**

"Is there another way out of this level?" she said to Eli, very quietly, as they moved.

"There's a maintenance shaft," Eli said, without **hesitation.** "At the far end of the corridor, behind the last holding room. I found it three days ago — the room isn't locked, and the shaft runs upward, I don't know where it comes out."

"How wide?"

"Narrow. Single file. Manageable."

Nora looked at Sable. Sable gave a single, precise nod.

They moved to the far end of the corridor. The last holding room — VIII — was unlocked, empty, smelling of damp and **disuse.** In the back wall, half-hidden behind a shelf that had

been pushed slightly out from its original position by someone who had clearly also noticed it and investigated, was a metal grate approximately sixty centimetres square.

Eli pulled the shelf aside. He did it quietly and efficiently, which told her something about what eight days of **enforced** stillness did to a person who was used to thinking his way through problems.

"I loosened the grate," he said. "Three days ago. It swings outward."

He pressed it. It swung.

"Of course you did," Nora said, and felt something that she identified, **incongruously**, as pride.

The shaft was dark and narrow and smelled strongly of old stone and rust, and climbing it single file in near-total darkness with only the feel of iron rungs under her hands was the least enjoyable physical experience Nora had had in recent memory. She went second, behind Eli, with Sable below her, and she counted rungs to give herself something **concrete** to track and tried not to think about where the shaft came out or what would be waiting if the answer was wrong.

Forty-two rungs.

Light at the top — not much, but enough. A grate similar to the one below, which Eli pushed open with both hands and a controlled effort that suggested it was heavier than the first. It swung with a groan that sounded **catastrophic** in the enclosed

space and was probably, she told herself, entirely inaudible above.

Eli climbed through. Nora climbed through. Sable came last, pulling the grate back into place behind her with the **methodical** precision that Nora was beginning to think was simply how Sable approached all things.

They were in a narrow **utility** corridor. Concrete floor, exposed pipes, strip lighting that hummed faintly. It looked like the maintenance underbelly of an ordinary building — not the Unmarked's network, or not the deliberately constructed part of it.

"Where are we?" Sable asked.

"I have no idea," Nora said.

"Approximately below the building on the corner," Eli said. "I tracked the direction of the shaft." He looked at the corridor. "This way should be east. East takes us toward the street."

They went east.

Two minutes later, a fire door at the end of the utility corridor opened — Eli shouldered it, the alarm bar giving without triggering anything audible — and they stepped out into an alley that smelled of rain and cold air and the distant **ambience** of a city going about its evening.

Nora leaned against the alley wall for exactly three seconds.

Then she pushed off it and looked at Eli — really looked at him, the first proper look since the holding room, in actual light.

He looked back at her. His expression was the complicated thing she'd seen coming — not broken, but **altered**, carrying something new that hadn't been there before. He would need time. Adaeze had been right about that.

"You need to tell me everything," she said. "But not here."

"I know," he said. "I found the Lexicon, Nora."

"I know you did."

"It changes — it changes what we know about the Unmarked. What they've been. The things they've done." His voice was steady but with an **undercurrent** of something that had been sitting with him for eight days in a small room. "Someone needs to know. Beyond us. The whole organisation needs to know."

Nora looked at him. Then she looked at Sable.

Sable met her eyes with an expression that was, for once, entirely **unguarded** — and what was in it was the same thing that had been building in Nora since she'd first sat across from Peter Craine and heard the word *Lexicon* spoken aloud.

Not just rescue. Not just finding Eli and getting out.

Something larger. Something that would actually mean all of this had been worth doing.

"I think," Nora said carefully, "that I have an idea about that."

SAT Words in This Chapter: rationally · subtle · productive · absolute · insulated · characteristically · confinement · vigilant · equanimity · fluctuation · vulnerable · manifesting · hesitation

· disuse · enforced · incongruously · catastrophic · methodical · utility · undercurrent · unguarded

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Fourteen: What Eli Found

They went to Mr. Voss.

It was the most **defensible** choice — the Morrow Archive was not affiliated with the Unmarked in any way the organisation officially recognised, Mr. Voss had spent thirty-one years maintaining that **distinction** carefully, and it was the one place Nora was confident they could sit for several hours without anyone looking for them there. She sent a message from the alley: *Coming. Five of us. Need the room.* He replied in under a minute: *Door is open.*

They arrived in two groups — Nora, Eli, and Sable first, then Adaeze and Theo, who had left the common room separately after the alarm situation resolved itself. Theo had a small cut above his left eyebrow that he hadn't had before, which he explained with characteristic **brevity** as "the sentinel was less convinced than I'd hoped, briefly" and declined to **elaborate** on. Sable looked at the cut and then at Theo with an expression that was **ostensibly** neutral and was clearly not.

Mr. Voss, when he saw Eli, said nothing for a moment. Then he said: "Sit down, all of you. I'll make tea." He said it in the tone of a man who understood that tea was not the point but that having something to do with one's hands was occasionally the most **humane** thing on offer.

They sat. Eli sat in the chair closest to the door, which Nora noted — the **instinct** of someone who had spent eight days in a

room with one entrance and had not yet **recalibrated** to open spaces.

He talked for an hour.

What he had found — what he had read, in the forty minutes he'd spent in the restricted archive before Sable arrived and the world changed — was not the entire Lexicon. The volume was too large, the Codex Script too dense, the forty minutes too brief. But he had read enough.

"The first third of the volume is historical records," he said. His voice was steady in the way of someone who had spent eight days organising what they knew into something they could deliver without **fragmenting.** "Accounts going back to the fifteenth century. Things the Unmarked did that they couldn't acknowledge — suppression of documents, **coercion** of scholars, in a few cases what reads as outright violence against people who were considered threats. The language is formal and **detached** in the way of official records — it describes these things without **commentary**, which is in some ways worse than if it were defended."

No one spoke.

"The middle section is more recent — roughly the last hundred years. The same categories of action, more **systematised.** More **procedural.** They'd developed **protocols** by then — formal methods for each type of **suppression**, each type of removal. The memory **procedure** I was apparently scheduled for this week appears in that section. It was developed in the 1970s." He paused. "It has been used on forty-three people."

"Forty-three," Adaeze said quietly.

"That the Lexicon records. The two entries marked *containment complete* in the recent record — those aren't memory **suppression.** I don't know exactly what they are. The language is different. More **oblique.**" He looked at his hands. "I have a **hypothesis** I don't want to state."

"Don't state it yet," Nora said. "What's in the last section?"

Eli looked up. "The last section is what made the Redactors take me." He said it with the clarity of someone who had arrived, over eight days, at a complete understanding of the **sequence** of events that had led to their current position. "The last section is an account of the Redactors themselves. Their founding, their operations, their leadership. It names names — every inner council member who has been involved, every decision they made, every action they took. It is, in effect, a complete **record** of **culpability.** And it was written by someone inside the inner council."

A silence.

"Someone inside the inner council wrote it?" Craine said.

"Someone inside the inner council has been **maintaining** it," Eli said. "The most recent entries are from three months ago. The handwriting changes across the decades — multiple contributors, I think, over many years. But the most recent entries are all the same hand." He met Craine's eyes. "I don't know whose."

Craine was very still.

"Peter," Adaeze said, with the precision of someone placing a word exactly where it needed to land.

Craine looked at the table. Then he looked up. "My predecessor on the inner council," he said slowly. "She retired eight years ago. She told me, when she transferred her responsibilities, that there was a document I should know about. That it was important and that it was **protected** and that I should never, under any circumstances, attempt to move or destroy it." He paused. "I thought she was speaking about the Lexicon in general. I didn't understand she meant — " He stopped.

"She was the contributor," Sable said.

"She was maintaining it," Craine said. "And she **transferred** that responsibility to me without telling me she was doing it." He looked at Eli. "I didn't know. I want to be clear — I didn't know the last section existed."

"I believe you," Eli said, simply.

"The point," Nora said, because the **pertinent** thing was not who had written it but what it meant, "is that the Lexicon is a complete record of **culpability** for six centuries of the Unmarked's actions. Including everything the Redactors have done. Including Vera Strand." She looked around the table. "And it can't be destroyed and it can't be moved."

"But it can be read," Theo said.

"It can be read," Nora said. "By anyone who gets into the restricted archive."

Another silence — a different quality from the previous ones. This one had something in it that felt like the **threshold** of a

decision rather than the weight of information.

"You want to make it accessible," Sable said.

"I want every member of the Unmarked to read it," Nora said. "Not just us. Not just the people in this room. Every archivist, every operative, every initiate who has been walking through that common room believing they're part of something that has a purpose they can be proud of." She paused. "The Redactors are powerful because no one knows what they've done. The moment everyone knows, that power **collapses.**"

"Getting every member of the Unmarked into the restricted archive is not **feasible,**" Adaeze said.

"Getting the Lexicon out of the restricted archive is," Nora said. "Or getting copies of its contents out. **Translated. Distributed.** To every member simultaneously, so there's no opportunity to contain it before it's been read." She looked at Theo. "You can translate Codex Script."

"Slowly," Theo said. "Not all of it — not in any reasonable timeframe."

"My father can," Nora said.

The room went quiet in a new way.

"Your father," Mr. Voss said carefully, "is a linguistics professor who specialises in extinct and obscure dialects, who has spent decades in **proximity** to materials related to the Unmarked without knowing it, and who has one of the most **comprehensive** working knowledges of ancient and constructed language systems of anyone currently alive." He looked at Nora. "You want to tell him everything."

"I want to give him the Lexicon and forty-eight hours," Nora said. "And then I want Peter to help us get the translation to every member of the Unmarked at once."

"I have access to the internal communication network," Craine said slowly. "Inner council clearance includes broadcast **privileges** — the ability to send a message to every registered member simultaneously. It's used for formal announcements." He paused. "It has never been used for anything like this."

"Would it work?" Nora asked.

"**Technically,** yes," Craine said. "**Politically** — once I send it, I cannot unsend it. And Vera Strand will know immediately who did."

"Yes," Nora said. "She will."

Craine looked at her for a long moment. Then he looked at his hands — the same gesture she'd seen from him at Foundry, the looking-at-one's-hands that meant a decision was being processed somewhere below the level of speech.

"All right," he said. "But we move quickly. Once they discover the holding room is empty, the **calculus** changes significantly."

"How long do we have?" Sable asked.

"The next check on the tertiary level is at eight this evening," Craine said. "It's currently" — he checked his watch — "five forty-three."

"Two hours and seventeen minutes," Eli said.

"Then we need to move," Nora said. She looked at Mr. Voss. "Will you come with me to speak to my father?"

Mr. Voss looked at her over his glasses with the expression of a man who had spent thirty-one years being **circumspect** and **uninvolved** and who was now, by a series of entirely **logical** steps that he had apparently been unable to prevent, sitting in his own archive at five forty-three in the evening surrounded by five people about to do something **audacious.**

"Yes," he said. "I rather think I will."

He said it with the **gravity** of someone arriving, at seventy-one, at the thing they had been building toward for a long time without knowing it.

SAT Words in This Chapter: defensible · brevity · elaborate · ostensibly · humane · recalibrated · fragmenting · coercion · detached · systematised · procedural · oblique · hypothesis · culpability · pertinent · threshold · feasible · distributed · proximity · comprehensive · privileges · calculus · circumspect · audacious · gravity

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Fifteen: The Professor

They left the others at the archive — Eli, Sable, Theo, Adaeze, and Craine, with instructions to stay off their phones except for emergencies and to begin making a list of every Unmarked member whose contact details Craine could access through the internal network. Nora and Mr. Voss went on foot, because the Vale house was twelve minutes away and a cab required a driver who might remember two people in a hurry, and twelve minutes was fast enough.

They walked quickly and without much conversation, which suited Nora. She was using the twelve minutes to think — specifically, to think about how to explain to her father in the least **traumatic** and most **expedient** way possible that his son had been held captive by a secret society for eight days, that the secret society had been quietly interfering with his academic research for years, that one of his oldest areas of professional interest turned out to be directly connected to said secret society's six-hundred-year-old internal language, and that she needed him to translate a large and historically significant document in under two hours.

There was no version of this that was not going to be a difficult conversation.

"He's going to have questions," she said, at the seven-minute mark.

"Of course he is," Mr. Voss said. He was walking with a **brisk** efficiency that suggested he was in better physical condition

than his armchair manner implied. "He's an academic. Questions are his primary mode of **engagement** with the world."

"How much do you know about him? Personally, not professionally."

"Very little. We have corresponded twice — brief exchanges about **overlapping** areas of research, both initiated by me, neither of which he would likely remember." Mr. Voss glanced at her. "I know his work. His **methodology** is careful and his **instincts** are good. He has come closer to the truth about several things than almost anyone outside the Unmarked, which is why they've been **cautious** about his research." He paused. "He's also, I suspect, been carrying a background sense that certain doors have been closed to him for reasons he couldn't identify. Academics notice when their inquiries meet **resistance** that doesn't have an **academic** explanation."

"He'll want to understand everything," Nora said.

"Yes."

"We don't have time for everything."

"No," Mr. Voss agreed. "We have time for enough."

Her mother answered the door.

This was not part of the plan — Nora had expected her father to be in his study, her mother still at the office, and had prepared accordingly. Instead she found her mother in the hallway with her coat still on and her keys in her hand and an expression that

moved through three states in approximately one second: relief at seeing Nora, **wariness** at seeing Mr. Voss, and then something sharper as her eyes moved between them and her mind, which was exceptionally fast, began to assemble the available information into a shape she didn't yet have a name for.

"Nora," she said. "Who is this?"

"This is Edmund Voss," Nora said. "He's a scholar and a curator and he has information about Eli. Can we come in?"

Her mother looked at Mr. Voss for exactly the length of time she needed to take his measure — which, Nora had observed over sixteen years, was rarely more than five seconds — and then stepped back from the door.

"Daniel," she called, toward the study. "Come to the sitting room."

Her father arrived with the slightly **distracted** air of someone pulled from deep concentration and still partially there. He saw Nora, and something in his face **reorganised** with the particular movement of a parent seeing their child and performing an automatic status check. He saw Mr. Voss, and the distraction cleared entirely.

"Professor Vale," Mr. Voss said. "I apologise for the **abrupt** arrival. My name is Edmund Voss. I was a scholar of ancient and constructed languages at Edinburgh before I became a curator. You won't know my name but I know yours — your

work on the **convergent** features of pre-Hellenic dialects is among the most **rigorous** I've encountered."

Her father blinked. The mention of pre-Hellenic dialects had, as Nora had expected it would, operated on him like a key in a lock — his full attention arrived at once. "I don't recall us corresponding."

"We did, briefly. You wouldn't remember — I wrote under a different name, for reasons I'll explain." Mr. Voss sat, without being invited, in the manner of someone who understood that formality was going to cost them time they didn't have. "I'm going to tell you something that will be difficult to hear in the order I'm about to tell it, and I'm going to ask you to hold your questions until I've finished, because we have a limited amount of time and the most important information comes at the end. Can you do that?"

Her father looked at Nora. She nodded.

He sat. "Yes," he said.

Mr. Voss told him.

He was, Nora reflected, watching, **extraordinarily** good at this — at the **calibration** of information, at knowing how much to give and in what order, at reading his listener and adjusting his **cadence** accordingly. He led with Eli — with the fact that Eli was safe and physically unharmed, which he placed first with the **deliberate** care of a man who understood that a father needed to know this before he could hear anything else. Then he moved backward: the Unmarked, their history, their presence in the city, their interference with Professor Vale's research. He was **precise** and he was honest and he did not **minimise** the

parts that were alarming, but he framed them in a way that built understanding before emotion, which was, Nora thought, the right order.

Her father sat through it without speaking. His hands were flat on his knees. His face was doing something that she watched with attention — the movement of a very organised mind encountering information that was **reorganising** its entire framework, which was a process she could almost see happening in real time, like watching someone rebuild a structure from the foundations up while keeping the walls standing.

When Mr. Voss finished, there was a silence.

Her mother spoke first. "Where is Eli now?"

"Safe," Nora said. "With people I trust. About twelve minutes from here."

Another silence.

Her father said: "The Codex Script."

"Yes," Mr. Voss said.

"I've seen it," her father said. Not as a question. He looked at the middle distance with the expression of someone whose past was **rearranging** itself in the light of new information. "Three times, in different archival contexts, over twenty years. I thought it was a constructed language — possibly a **cryptographic** script developed by a specific academic or religious community. I wrote a paper arguing it showed **structural affinities** with certain Armenian medieval scripts." He paused. "The paper was rejected by every journal I

submitted it to, for reasons that were technically **coherent** but never quite satisfied me."

"The Unmarked has people on several editorial boards," Mr. Voss said, without **apology.**

Her father absorbed this with a stillness that was, Nora recognised, the same stillness she had herself — the look of someone who has received difficult information and is holding it carefully, not suppressing it but choosing not to let it become the most important thing in the room yet.

"You need me to translate a document," he said.

"A large one," Nora said. "In under two hours. I know that's — "

"Show me."

She opened the photographs on her phone and handed it to him. He looked at the first image for approximately four seconds. Then he stood up, went to his study, and came back with his reading glasses and a legal pad and a pen.

"I'll need my reference materials," he said. "And quiet." He looked at Mr. Voss. "You're familiar with the script?"

"To a degree," Mr. Voss said. "Not at your level."

"Then you'll be useful." He looked at Nora. "Ninety minutes."

"You can do it in ninety minutes?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But I can do enough of it in ninety minutes that the essential meaning is clear." He looked at her with the expression she'd been seeing on his face her whole life — the look he got when a problem was genuinely interesting

and the rest of the world had slightly receded. "This is the most significant linguistic document I have ever been asked to look at."

"I know," Nora said.

"I'm going to have a great deal to say about the research **implications** after this is over."

"I know that too," she said.

He almost smiled. Then he looked at her mother, who had been sitting very still through all of this with her hands folded and her expression carrying the particular **composure** of a woman who had processed something enormous and was choosing, for now, to set it aside in favour of what needed doing.

"Carolyn," he said.

"Go," her mother said. "Both of you. I'll make coffee." She looked at Nora. "And then you're going to tell me everything else."

"Yes," Nora said. "I will."

She meant it. The things she'd kept from her mother over the past ten days sat in her chest with the particular weight of things that had been necessary and were now, she hoped, nearly over.

Her father and Mr. Voss went to the study. The door closed. Through it, after a moment, she heard her father's voice and then Mr. Voss's — the low, **intent** exchange of two people who had forgotten the room around them because the problem in front of them was too **absorbing.**

Nora sat with her mother on the sofa and told her everything.

SAT Words in This Chapter: traumatic · expedient · brisk · engagement · methodology · instincts · resistance · wariness · abrupt · rigorous · calibration · cadence · minimise · cryptographic · structural · affinities · coherent · implications · composure · intent · absorbing

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Sixteen: The Clock

The study door stayed closed for ninety-four minutes.

Nora sat with her mother and told her everything in the order it had happened, beginning with the burnt toast and the open back door and the torn paper with the symbol she hadn't been able to identify. Her mother listened the way she did everything — with complete, **undivided** attention, asking no questions until Nora had finished, and then asking three questions in rapid succession that went directly to the three most **salient** gaps in what she'd been told.

"This woman — Adaeze — you trust her?"

"Yes."

"And Craine. He's still with the others at the archive?"

"Yes."

"The broadcast — once it goes out, there's no way to recall it?"

"No."

Her mother was quiet for a moment. Then: "Good," she said, with the particular **finality** of someone who has assessed a situation and reached a conclusion. "It should be **irrevocable.** That's the only kind of action that means anything against people like this."

Nora looked at her.

"I've spent twenty years in the nonprofit sector," her mother said, with a slight **acerbity** that Nora found deeply comforting. "I know what institutions that have convinced themselves of their own **righteousness** look like. I know what it takes to move them." She paused. "You should have told me."

"I know."

"You were protecting us."

"I was also not entirely sure you'd let me continue," Nora said.

Her mother looked at her for a moment. "I wouldn't have," she said. "But I would have helped." She said it without **reproach** — simply as information, offered for future reference.

At the archive, according to the message Sable sent at seven twelve, things were **tense** but **functional.**

Craine had compiled a list of four hundred and seventeen registered Unmarked members from the internal network — names, contact protocols, the encrypted addresses through which the broadcast would reach them. Adaeze had been working with Theo to draft a covering message that would contextualise the Lexicon translation when it arrived — something that explained what the document was and where it had come from without being so long that people stopped reading before they reached the content. Eli had been helping, and Sable reported that he was "focused and useful and eating the sandwiches Adaeze made, which is a good sign."

The good sign **notation** made something loosen very slightly in Nora's chest.

At seven forty-one, Craine sent a single message: *They know.*

She showed it to her mother, who read it and stood up immediately. "Study," she said.

They knocked. Her father's voice, **abstracted** and slightly **impatient**: "One moment." Then, after a pause: "Come in."

The study was in a state that looked like **chaos** but wasn't — Nora recognised her father's working **entropy**, the way his desk always looked when he was deep in something, papers distributed according to an internal logic that was entirely **legible** to him and entirely **opaque** to everyone else. Mr. Voss sat across from him with his own set of notes, the two of them having apparently divided the document into sections and worked through them in parallel, cross-referencing at junctions.

"How much?" Nora asked.

Her father looked up. His glasses were slightly askew and there was ink on his left hand and his expression had the bright, **febrile** quality it got when he'd been working intensely on something difficult and had broken through to the other side of it. "Approximately seventy percent of the substantive content. The remainder is either **formulaic** repetition — legal-style language that restates the same categories of information in slightly different forms — or sections where the script is degraded enough that certainty isn't possible." He paused. "The essential meaning is complete. The record is — " He stopped. Looked at his notes. "**Comprehensive**," he said, with a weight that suggested the word wasn't adequate but was the best available.

"We need to move," Nora said. "They know the holding room is empty. How long until they understand the full **scope** of what's happening?"

"They already do," Mr. Voss said quietly. He was looking at his phone — he had a phone, which had surprised Nora slightly when she first saw it, though on reflection she couldn't say why. "Peter just sent me a message separately. Vera Strand has called an emergency inner council session. She'll be **mobilising** within the hour."

"Then we have less than an hour," Nora said. She looked at her father. "Can you compile what you have into a single document? Formatted so it's readable — not academic notes, but something a non-specialist can understand?"

"Give me fifteen minutes," her father said.

"You have ten," her mother said, from the doorway.

He looked at her. Something passed between them — the compressed, **efficient** communication of two people who had been married long enough to have an entire conversation in a look.

"Ten," he said, and turned back to his desk.

It took eleven minutes. Nora chose not to mention this.

The document her father produced was not polished — it was a working translation, annotated in places with his own **parenthetical** clarifications where the Codex vocabulary had no clean English **equivalent**, flagged in others where his

certainty was less than complete. But it was **coherent** and it was devastating, and when Nora read the first three pages standing in the study doorway while her father watched her and her mother stood beside her with her arms folded, she understood for the first time in the full, **visceral** sense what Eli had meant by *devastated*.

Six centuries of it. Documented in careful, **dispassionate** detail by people who had known exactly what they were recording and had recorded it anyway — not to excuse it but to ensure it **persisted.** To ensure that the knowledge of what had been done persisted, so that eventually it could not be ignored.

She thought about the person on the inner council who had been maintaining the last section. Who had sat in meetings with Vera Strand and voted on procedural matters and then gone home and written down every wrong thing in careful Codex Script, year after year, keeping the record alive.

She thought it was one of the **bravest** things she had ever heard of.

"Send it to me," she said to her father. "All of it."

He sent it to her phone. She forwarded it immediately to Craine.

Then she called the archive.

Theo answered. "We're ready," he said, before she could speak. "Craine's been ready for twenty minutes. He's been very **stoic** about it."

"Tell him to send it," Nora said.

A pause. Then, in the background, she heard Craine's voice — low, deliberate, saying something she couldn't make out. And then Theo: "It's sent."

The word landed in the study with a **weight** that was not loud but was **absolute.**

Four hundred and seventeen members of the Unmarked. The translation of the Lexicon. Everything.

Irrevocable.

The next forty minutes were the strangest Nora had experienced in a week that had contained a significant number of strange experiences.

They gathered — all of them, eventually — in the Vale sitting room. Her parents, Mr. Voss, and then, arriving in a group twenty minutes after the broadcast, the others: Adaeze and Craine first, then Theo and Sable with Eli between them, Eli looking at the house he'd grown up in with an expression that was too **complicated** to read all at once and that Nora decided to give him time with.

Her mother saw Eli and did something that Nora had almost never seen her do — she stopped being **composed** for approximately four seconds, crossing the room and taking hold of him with the controlled urgency of someone who had been not-falling-apart for ten days through sheer **determination** and had just been given **permission** to feel how much it had cost.

Eli held on. Over her shoulder, he looked at Nora. She looked back.

The sitting room was **crowded** in a way that felt, despite everything, like the right kind of **crowded.**

"What happens now?" Theo said, into the **lull** that followed.

"Now," Craine said, sitting in the armchair that was usually her father's, looking like a man who had just done something **irrevocable** and was **reconciling** himself to it in real time, "we wait for the Unmarked to read what they've been sent. And then we find out whether four hundred and seventeen people can be moved by the truth."

"They can," Adaeze said. She said it with the quiet **conviction** of someone who had needed to believe this for a long time and had just been given a reason to. "Some of them joined for the same reasons I did. The same reasons Sable did." She looked at Nora. "People who care about preserved knowledge, about history, about doing something that matters — they can be moved. The Redactors counted on their **passivity.** That was always the **miscalculation.**"

The room was quiet.

Outside, the city went about its evening. Cars passed. Someone's music drifted briefly through a window and was gone.

Nora sat in the corner of the sofa and looked at her brother, who had come back to himself in degrees since the alley — more present with each passing hour, more recognisably Eli, though with that new quality she'd noted that would take longer to understand — and felt the particular, **exhausted** relief of

someone who has been moving toward a fixed point for a long time and has finally, possibly, arrived.

Her phone buzzed.

Then buzzed again. And again.

She looked at the screen. Unknown numbers — encrypted contact protocols, the kind Craine had described. Messages coming in from the Unmarked membership, one after another, **accelerating.**

She couldn't read them yet. There were too many.

But they were coming.

SAT Words in This Chapter: undivided · salient · irrevocable · acerbity · righteousness · reproach · abstracted · entropy · febrile · formulaic · comprehensive · mobilising · parenthetical · equivalent · visceral · dispassionate · persisted · stoic · absolute · determination · lull · reconciling · conviction · passivity · miscalculation · accelerating

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Seventeen: The Reckoning

The messages kept coming for three hours.

By midnight, Craine's phone had received two hundred and thirty-one responses from the membership. He sat at the Vale kitchen table reading them with the careful, **methodical** attention of someone processing a seismic event in real time — which was, Nora thought, precisely what he was doing. She sat across from him with her own tea and read what he chose to share across the table, and piece by piece the shape of the Unmarked's response began to **coalesce.**

It was not uniform. She hadn't expected it to be.

A significant portion — perhaps a third of those who responded in the first hours — were **incredulous.** Their messages ranged from terse **dismissal** to **indignant** demands to know who had sent this document and on what authority. A smaller number were immediately hostile: accusations of **fabrication**, of **treachery**, of a **coordinated** attack on the organisation by external **adversaries.** These, Craine set aside in a separate pile with the expression of someone who had anticipated this and was not surprised.

But the majority — and as the night went on, the majority grew — were something else.

"This one is from an archivist who's been with the organisation for fifteen years," Craine said, reading from his phone. He paraphrased carefully, in the way he'd been doing all evening. "She says she had **suspicions** about two of the names in the

Redactor section. Colleagues who left under circumstances that never quite made sense. She says she wants to know what's being done."

"What about this cluster?" Theo asked, leaning over from the adjacent chair. He'd been helping Craine sort and **categorise** responses for the past hour, having apparently decided that this was the most useful thing he could do and appointed himself to it without being asked, which Nora had noticed was how Theo generally operated.

"These four are from a field team — they work outside the network, **peripheral** operations. They received the broadcast simultaneously and have apparently been discussing it among themselves. They're asking for a meeting." Craine set the phone down. "The operative word, across the **substantive** responses, is *what now*. People who have read the document and accepted it — or are accepting it — want to know what the next step is."

"Which is exactly the right question," Adaeze said. She was standing by the window, looking out at the dark street, and had been saying very little for the past hour in the way of someone thinking rather than withdrawing. "The broadcast was the necessary first step. But information without **agency** is just knowledge of a problem. They need something to do with it."

"Vera Strand," Sable said, from the sofa. She had been sitting beside Eli for the past hour, not **conspicuously** close but present in a way that Nora had noticed and filed as something to think about later. "What is she doing right now?"

Craine looked at his phone. He had two contacts on the inner council who had, within the first hour of the broadcast, sent him

messages that he'd described to the room as "deeply alarmed and potentially **sympathetic.**" He had been exchanging brief messages with both. "According to the more **forthcoming** of the two — she's called an emergency **convening** of the full inner council. Not just her **faction.** The whole council, including the members she doesn't fully control." He paused. "That's significant. It means the membership response is large enough that she can't contain it without appearing to address it."

"She's going to **reframe** it," Nora's mother said. She had been at the kitchen table for the past two hours, having declined to go to bed with the matter-of-fact authority of someone who found the suggestion **mildly offensive.** She was the only person in the room, Nora thought, who looked entirely **alert** at nearly midnight. "She'll present a **narrative** in which the broadcast was an attack — **malicious**, **orchestrated**, designed to **destabilise** the organisation. She'll position herself as the person who can hold things together."

"Can she?" Nora asked.

"That depends," her mother said, "on how many people on that inner council have read the document and are no longer willing to hold together with her."

Craine looked at his phone again. "I have a message from the second council contact," he said. His voice had changed slightly — a **tautness** in it that hadn't been there before. "She's called the meeting for tomorrow morning. Eight o'clock. In the common room." He looked up. "The common room. Not a private inner council session. The common room."

"She's opening it to the general membership," Sable said. She sat up straighter. "She wants witnesses. She wants to perform **transparency.**"

"Or," Eli said — his first contribution to the strategic conversation since they'd gathered, delivered with the quiet certainty of someone who had spent eight days thinking — "she wants to **demonstrate** that she can control the room when the membership is present. That she can face this publicly and come out of it intact." He looked at Craine. "Which means she's confident she can."

"Or," Adaeze said, turning from the window, "she's made an **error.** Powerful people who have operated without **accountability** for a long time sometimes **miscalculate** how an audience will respond when they finally see things clearly." She looked at Nora. "An open meeting in the common room means anyone can attend."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"Including us," Nora said.

They made decisions in the next two hours that Nora thought she would remember for the rest of her life — not because they were dramatic but because they were made quietly, by people who were tired and who had been through something **arduous** and who were choosing, one by one, what they were willing to do next.

Craine would attend as an inner council member, which he had every right to do. He would not **preempt** Vera Strand — he

would let her speak first, let her **construct** her **narrative**, and then he would respond to it with the document and the **provenance** of the broadcast. He had, Nora's mother observed, the significant advantage of someone who had nothing left to lose, which was the most **liberating** possible position from which to tell the truth.

Adaeze would attend as a former member who had been **coercively** managed for eight years. Her presence would be a statement before she said a word.

Sable and Theo would attend as current members — initiates who had read the broadcast and had every **legitimate** right to be present at a membership meeting.

"And me?" Nora asked.

"You're not a member," Sable said.

"No," Nora said. "But I'm the person who found the document and organised the broadcast. If Vera Strand is going to **construct** a **narrative** about what happened, I'd like to be in the room when she does it."

A pause.

"You'd be walking into the Unmarked's space," Craine said. "After what happened yesterday. After the holding room."

"I know."

"It's not without risk."

"I know that too." She met his eyes. "Eli found the Lexicon. You sent the broadcast. My father translated the document. My

mother — " she glanced at her mother, who was watching her with the **unreadable** expression she occasionally produced when she was deciding something " — my mother is going to make sure that if anything happens to any of us, the translation goes somewhere significantly more public than four hundred and seventeen Unmarked members."

Her mother nodded once. She had proposed this herself, forty minutes ago, with the calm **efficiency** of someone for whom contingency planning was **second nature.** She had a journalist friend, a solicitor, and two board members of organisations that dealt in **accountability** and **transparency** who would each receive the full document package by nine in the morning if Nora's mother sent a specific message by eight fifty-nine.

"Then you attend," Craine said. He said it with the **gravity** of someone who had learned, in the past twenty-four hours, that arguing with a Vale was a **futile** expenditure of energy.

"Thank you," Nora said.

"Don't thank me yet," he said. "We still have to get through tomorrow morning."

The house settled into a kind of **improvised** overnight — people sleeping in chairs and on sofas and in Nora's case in her own bed for four hours, which felt both **necessary** and faintly **surreal.** Mr. Voss declined the offered sofa with the dignity of a man who had his own perfectly good chair at the archive twelve minutes away, and left at one in the morning with his notes under his arm and the expression of someone who had had, at

seventy-one, the most **consequential** day of his professional life and was going to need a night to **assimilate** it.

Her father sat in his study until three, reading his own translation. She could see the light under the door when she went to the bathroom at two forty-five.

She knocked. "Dad."

"Come in."

He was sitting at his desk with the printed pages in front of him — he'd printed them at some point, which was such a **characteristically** him response to a digital document that she felt something warm move through her. He looked up when she came in.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He considered this with the seriousness he gave all questions. "I think so," he said. "I think I'm — processing the **magnitude** of it." He looked at the pages. "This document is going to **recontextualise** thirty years of my research, Nora. There are threads I've been pulling at for decades that lead here." He paused. "I'm angry about the **obstruction.** I'll be angry about it for some time."

"That seems reasonable," she said.

"I'm also — " He stopped. Looked at her with the expression he sometimes produced when he was about to say something that mattered to him and he wasn't entirely sure how to say it. "I'm **proud** of you. I want to be clear about that. In the way that is — somewhat beyond my usual **vocabulary** for the feeling."

Nora looked at her father — distracted and ink-stained and slightly awry, with thirty years of **obstructed** research on his desk and the most significant linguistic document of his career in front of him and his son asleep on the sofa downstairs — and felt something **settle** in her chest that had been in motion for eleven days.

"Get some sleep," she said. "We have an early start."

She went back to her room. Ohio stared at her from the ceiling.

She was asleep in four minutes.

SAT Words in This Chapter: methodical · coalesce · incredulous · dismissal · indignant · fabrication · treachery · adversaries · categorise · substantive · agency · conspicuously · forthcoming · convening · reframe · narrative · destabilise · tautness · accountability · miscalculate · arduous · preempt · provenance · liberating · coercively · legitimate · unreadable · efficiency · consequential · assimilate · magnitude · recontextualise · obstruction

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Eighteen: The Common Room

The common room had not changed since the first time Nora walked into it eleven days ago — the same warm light, the same impossible shelves climbing into shadow, the same hush of a space built for people who valued quiet. What had changed was everything else. Then, she had been an **intruder**, trying to make herself small enough not to be noticed. Now she walked in at seven fifty-eight with Craine on one side and Adaeze on the other, and forty or fifty members already seated in loose rows, and felt the room's attention land on her like a physical weight.

Nobody told her to leave. That, in itself, felt **significant.**

Theo and Sable found seats near the back, close enough to the door that Sable had clearly chosen the position **deliberately.** Eli sat beside Nora, which had required a short, quiet argument at home that morning — her mother had wanted him to stay, and he had refused with a **resolve** that Nora recognised, because she'd inherited the same one.

Vera Strand arrived at eight exactly.

She did not look like a woman whose organisation had spent the night in **disarray.** She wore the same composed, faintly **glacial** expression Nora remembered from the one time she'd glimpsed her before, and she crossed to the front of the room with the **unhurried** confidence of someone who had given this kind of address a hundred times and expected this to be the hundred-and-first. She did not look at Nora. She did not look at Craine. She looked at the room, and the room, Nora noticed,

looked back at her with an attention that was no longer entirely **deferential.**

"Last night," Vera Strand said, "every member of this organisation received a document." Her voice was even, almost gentle — the voice of someone managing a crisis rather than confessing to one. "I understand the document has caused **distress.** I understand it has raised questions. I want to address those questions directly, because this organisation has survived six centuries by being honest with itself, and I intend that we continue to be."

It was, Nora thought, a genuinely **masterful** opening. It conceded nothing and claimed everything.

"The document you received was real," Vera Strand continued, "in the sense that it was a genuine translation of a genuine archive. What it was *not* was complete, or **contextualised**, or presented with any regard for the **consequences** of releasing four hundred years of internal record-keeping to four hundred and seventeen people simultaneously, with no **framework** for understanding it, no opportunity for the organisation to respond, and no consideration — " here her gaze finally found Nora, brief and precise as a blade " — for the safety of the people named within it, several of whom are currently sitting in this room."

A ripple went through the gathered members. Nora felt it like a change in air pressure.

"This was not transparency," Vera Strand said. "This was **sabotage.** Conducted by an outside party with no standing in this organisation, no understanding of its complexities, and — I

would suggest — no real interest in anyone's welfare beyond her own family's."

"That's not — " Theo started, half-rising, and Sable's hand on his arm was the only thing that kept him in his seat.

Vera Strand did not pause. "I am not here to deny that mistakes have been made over the centuries. Every institution this old has a history it would prefer to forget. I am here to say that the response to historical error is not **reckless** exposure. It is careful, internal, **accountable** reform — exactly the process this council has been quietly engaged in for years, before any of this began."

It was a lie, and it was an extraordinarily well-constructed one, and Nora understood with a cold drop in her stomach that some portion of the room was going to believe it. People wanted, she thought, to believe that the institution they had built their lives around could fix itself quietly, without the indignity of having been wrong in public. Vera Strand was offering them exactly that **absolution**, gift-wrapped.

"May I respond?"

Craine's voice was not loud. It didn't need to be. The room turned.

Vera Strand's expression did not change, but something in her stillness sharpened. "Peter," she said. "Of course."

He stood and walked to the front — not beside her, Nora noticed, but a few feet apart, claiming his own ground. He had not slept more than three hours and it showed in the grey under

his eyes, but his voice when he spoke was steady in a way Nora hadn't heard from him before.

"I have sat on this council for nine years," he said. "For most of that time, I believed what Vera just told you — that we were engaged in careful, internal reform. I believed it because I wanted to, and because the alternative was **untenable** to live with." He paused. "I was wrong. I have been wrong for nine years. And I think some of you have been wrong with me, for the same reasons."

"Peter," Vera Strand said, with the **measured** patience of someone correcting a colleague in front of guests, "this isn't the forum—"

"The last section of the Lexicon," Craine said, over her, "was not written by some careless archivist four hundred years ago. It was written by my **predecessor.** On this council. Documenting, in real time, the suppressions this council ordered — including the suppression of a sixteen-year-old boy nine days ago, on Vera's direct instruction, for the **infraction** of asking too many questions about his own father's research."

The room went very still.

"That instruction was given," Craine said, "to me. I followed it. I am not standing here as someone with **clean** hands. I am standing here because I finally read what I had been protecting, and I could not go on protecting it." He looked at the room — not at Vera Strand, at the members, dozens of faces he had presumably known for years. "Ask yourselves why the document had to arrive the way it did. Quietly, through channels, with time to **manage** the response — that was the **process** Vera just

described to you. It is also exactly how every suppression in that archive was carried out. Quietly. Through channels. With time to manage the response."

"That is not a comparison you are entitled to make," Vera Strand said, and for the first time her voice had an edge in it, thin but unmistakable.

"I am entitled to make it," Craine said, "because I helped run that process for nine years, and I am telling you it does not work the way you are describing. It works by making sure no one ever has to look at the whole picture at once. The broadcast was **reckless.** I agree with that completely. It was also the only thing that actually forced anyone to look."

A woman near the front stood — older, grey-haired, with the bearing of someone who had earned the right to interrupt a council member. "I've been with this organisation for thirty-one years," she said. "I want to know if my name is in that archive."

"It isn't," Craine said, without checking, because he had clearly already checked, because of course he had.

"Is anyone's name in this room?"

Craine hesitated for exactly one second, and that hesitation answered the question before he did. "Yes," he said. "Several."

The room broke into overlapping voices then — not chaos, exactly, but the sound of fifty controlled, careful, **scholarly** people losing, briefly, their collective composure. Vera Strand raised a hand, and for a moment the old habit of **deference** reasserted itself and the room quieted, and Nora understood, watching it happen, exactly how the organisation had survived

unchallenged for six hundred years. It wasn't fear. It was the simple, **ingrained** reflex of trusting the person who had always been in charge.

"I would ask," Vera Strand said, into the settling quiet, "that we not allow one **catastrophic** error in judgement — the broadcast — to undo decades of careful, **collective** stewardship. This council has protected this organisation through wars, through exposure, through every threat that has come against it. I am asking you to trust that process now, rather than the word of an outside teenager and a council member who has just admitted to lying to your faces for nine years."

It was, Nora thought, a genuinely good counterattack, aimed precisely at the fault line in the room — the part of every person there that wanted this to be manageable, wanted the **institution** they belonged to to still be the thing they'd believed in yesterday.

She stood up before she'd entirely decided to.

"My name is Nora Vale," she said, and her voice came out steadier than she felt, which she would be grateful for later. "I'm not a member of this organisation. I have no **stake** in whether it survives this morning. My only stake was getting my brother back, which I've already done." She felt Eli's hand find hers, briefly, and let go. "So I have no reason to lie to you, and every reason to tell you exactly what I found, because none of you have asked me yet, and I think you should."

The room, against every expectation she'd had walking in, waited for her to continue.

"The Lexicon isn't a weapon," she said. "It's a list. Of names. People this organisation decided were **inconvenient** — for asking questions, for refusing to forget things, for simply being in the way of someone's certainty that they were right. Forty-three suppressions that we know of. My brother would have been forty-four, four days from now, and none of you would ever have known his name, because that is precisely how this process is designed to work. Quietly. Through channels."

She looked, finally, at Vera Strand.

"You said I have no understanding of this organisation's complexities. You're right. I don't. I understand one thing very clearly, though, which is that an organisation that needs a teenager to break into its own archive to find out what it's been doing to its own people does not have a **stewardship** problem. It has a **truth** problem. And I'd rather have caused this morning's chaos than have let it stay quiet for one more year."

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then, from somewhere in the middle rows, a man Nora didn't recognise stood up. "I want to see the full document," he said. "Not the broadcast summary. All of it. Today."

"So do I," said the grey-haired woman from the front.

A third voice. A fourth. Vera Strand stood at the front of the room with her composure intact and her authority visibly, irreversibly **eroding**, and Nora understood, watching her face, that the older woman knew it too — that whatever happened in the next hour, the morning had already gone, **irretrievably**, in a direction she had not controlled.

"This meeting," Vera Strand said, "is adjourned. We will reconvene with a formal council process—"

"No," said the grey-haired woman, "I don't think it is."

SAT Words in This Chapter: intruder · significant · deliberately · resolve · disarray · glacial · unhurried · deferential · distress · masterful · contextualised · consequences · framework · sabotage · reckless · accountable · absolution · untenable · measured · predecessor · infraction · clean · manage · process · ingrained · catastrophic · collective · institution · stake · inconvenient · stewardship · truth · eroding · irretrievably

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Nineteen: What Remains

Vera Strand did not leave the common room so much as the room dissolved around her.

It happened slowly, and then all at once — the way Nora's father had once described **phase transitions** in language systems, a structure holding right up until the precise moment it didn't. The grey-haired woman's "I don't think it is" hung in the air, and for a second nobody moved, as if the room itself were waiting for permission to believe what had just happened. Then a younger man near the aisle stood and said, quietly but **distinctly**, "I'd like to second that," and after him three more rose, and within a minute the front of the room had simply stopped being Vera Strand's, in the way that authority can stop belonging to someone without a single object changing hands.

She did not shout. She did not argue further. She gathered the single folder she'd brought with her — Nora noticed, with a small **vindictive** satisfaction, that it had clearly never needed to be opened — and walked out through the side door with her spine perfectly straight, and Nora understood that this, too, was a kind of skill: the ability to lose with total **composure**, so that the losing itself looked almost like a choice.

"That's not the end of it," Adaeze murmured, low enough that only Nora and Craine heard her. "She still has **allies** on the council. People who'll wait this out and try again in six months, when everyone's tired of talking about it."

"Probably," Craine said. "But she just lost the room. That matters more than she'd like anyone to think."

The grey-haired woman — Nora would learn her name was Halvard, and that she had run the organisation's **archival** ethics committee for eleven years on a body that had apparently never once been asked to investigate the archive itself, a detail she delivered with the **dry**, exhausted humour of someone recalculating thirty years of her own life — took the front of the room with an entirely different energy than Vera Strand had brought to it. She did not perform authority. She simply assumed it, the way a person assumes a task nobody else is doing.

"We need a **provisional** structure," she said, "by the end of the week. Full access to the Lexicon for an independent review committee — and I do mean independent, not anyone who's sat on this council in the past decade. A public accounting, to the full membership, of every name in that document and what's being done about it. And—" she looked, briefly, toward the back of the room, to where Nora and Eli and Theo and Sable sat together " — some acknowledgement, formal and on the record, that we owe an apology we are nowhere near equipped to make **adequately**, to a family that does not belong to this organisation and did this work for us anyway."

A murmur of agreement went through the room — not **unanimous**, Nora noted, but enough.

They didn't stay for the rest of it. There would be weeks of it, Craine told them on the walk back up through the tunnels — committees, statements, the slow **bureaucratic** machinery of

an institution trying to rebuild itself in public, which was, he said, going to be far less dramatic and far more important than anything that had happened in the last eleven days. "Truth is the easy part," he said. "It's loud and it's frightening and it's over in an hour. What comes after is the **tedious** part, and it's the part that actually matters."

"That sounds like a warning," Sable said.

"It's an observation," Craine said. "Possibly also a warning."

They emerged into daylight that felt, to Nora, almost **disorienting** in its ordinariness — a Tuesday morning, traffic on the road above, someone's dog barking two gardens over, the entire **machinery** of the world continuing exactly as it had continued for the eleven days she'd spent learning that none of it was quite what it appeared to be. Eli stood blinking in the sun like someone recalibrating to a planet he'd left briefly.

"You okay?" she asked him.

"I keep waiting to feel different," he said. "Like there should be some — **threshold** I cross, and after it I'm a person this happened to instead of a person it's happening to." He shrugged, a small, **rueful** motion. "Mostly I just want breakfast."

"That's allowed."

Her mother was waiting on the front step when they got home, which felt **inevitable** in a way Nora couldn't entirely explain, except that her mother had spent eleven days being the most reliably present person in a story that kept trying to be about

secrecy, and it seemed correct that she'd be there at the end of it too. She didn't ask how it went. She looked at Eli, and at Nora, and at the loose, **tentative** ease of the four teenagers and one weary council member trailing up the path behind them, and seemed to take an immediate, **accurate** reading of the entire situation.

"Coffee," she said, "and then I want the whole thing, start to finish, in order, with nobody **editorialising.**"

"That's going to be a long story," Theo said.

"I have," her mother said, "an extremely high tolerance for long stories told accurately. It is, in fact, the only kind I have any **patience** for."

They told it at the kitchen table for two hours, passing the narrative back and forth — Theo's account of the alarm, Sable's of the corridor, Eli's careful, **methodical** recollection of three days spent mapping a maintenance shaft with nothing but patience and the absolute certainty that someone would eventually come looking for him. Nora's father came down halfway through, still in yesterday's shirt, and sat without interrupting, and twice reached over without looking up from his coffee to put his hand briefly on Eli's shoulder, as if checking, **periodically**, that his son remained **physically** present in the room.

"What happens to Mr. Voss now?" Nora asked, toward the end of it. "He can't go back to pretending he just runs an archive."

"He doesn't want to," Craine said. "He told me this morning he intends to spend whatever years he has left doing the thing he should have done thirty-one years ago, which is, in his words,

'stop being careful.'" He paused. "I believe he means it as a **mission statement,** not a complaint."

"And you?" Sable asked Craine directly, with the bluntness Nora had come to recognise as entirely characteristic. "What happens to you?"

Craine considered the question with real care, turning his coffee cup a quarter turn on the table before answering. "I sent Eli to that holding room," he said. "I'm not going to pretend the apology I owe disappears because I also sent the broadcast. I expect there will be a **reckoning** for me, formally, and I think there should be. I'd rather earn whatever comes back to this organisation than be handed it." He looked up. "But I'd do the broadcast again. Every time. Knowing exactly what it cost me to send it."

Nobody said anything for a moment. It was, Nora thought, the most honest thing anyone had said all morning, possibly all week.

That evening, after Craine and Adaeze had gone and Theo and Sable had been persuaded — with some difficulty, and a great deal of food — to go home and sleep in their own beds, Nora found Eli in his room, sitting on the edge of his bed with the *Count of Monte Cristo* paperback in his hands, not reading it, just holding it.

"You okay?" she asked again, because it seemed like the question that was going to need asking for a while yet.

"I keep thinking," he said, "about the forty-two names that aren't us. The ones nobody came looking for." He turned the book over in his hands. "We got lucky. You found a **symbol** scratched into a desk and a **dedication** in a book I'd already decided to leave for you, and you were stubborn enough and clever enough to follow both of them all the way down. Most people don't get a sister like that."

"Most people don't need one," Nora said. "You'd have found your own way out eventually. You'd already found the maintenance shaft."

"Three days before you got there," he agreed. "I'm not saying I'd have **languished.** I'm saying—" he stopped, searching, in the careful way their father searched for words when the feeling outran the **vocabulary** available for it " — I'm saying there's a difference between surviving something and being found. I got both. That's the part I keep coming back to."

Nora sat down beside him. Outside, the street was doing its ordinary evening things — someone's car pulling into a drive, a dog, the particular gold light of a June evening settling over a row of houses that had no idea what had nearly happened beneath one of their gardens eleven days ago.

"There are forty-two more names," she said. "Halvard's committee is going to need help making sense of that archive. Real help — people who can read it the way Dad and Mr. Voss can, and people who are willing to ask the **inconvenient** questions about it for as long as it takes."

Eli looked at her sideways. "You're not actually a member, you know. Vera Strand was right about that much."

"No," Nora agreed. "But nobody's stopped me yet."

He almost smiled. "Mum's going to have opinions about this."

"Mum," Nora said, "has had opinions since approximately day one. I don't think that's going to change based on what we decide to do next."

Downstairs, she could hear her father's voice, low and animated, on the phone with someone — Mr. Voss, probably, or one of the dozen colleagues who would, in the coming weeks, want to know exactly how Professor Vale had ended up at the centre of the most significant linguistic discovery of the decade. Her mother's voice answered something briefly, practical as ever. The ordinary sounds of a house that had, eleven days ago, lost a son, and had him back now, asking questions about maintenance shafts and forty-two strangers, in a voice that sounded, more than anything else, like itself again.

It wasn't an ending, Nora thought. Mr. Voss had told her once, in the archive, that the most dangerous mistake a researcher could make was believing a document's last page was the end of its story. The Lexicon wasn't closed. It had just, finally, been opened where people could see it.

That would have to be enough, for now.

SAT Words in This Chapter: phase transitions · distinctly · vindictive · composure · allies · archival · dry · provisional · adequately · unanimous · bureaucratic · tedious · disorienting · machinery · threshold · rueful · inevitable · tentative · accurate · editorialising · patience · methodical · periodically · physically

· mission statement · reckoning · symbol · dedication · languished · vocabulary · inconvenient

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twenty: The Forty-Two

It took three weeks for the first list to arrive.

Halvard sent it herself, by hand, in an envelope addressed to "Nora Vale and Family" in handwriting so **precise** it looked almost typeset — a habit, Nora would learn, that came from decades of cataloguing fragile manuscripts where a careless letter could **obscure** a date by a century. Inside was a single sheet: nine names, the earliest of the forty-three suppressions, each with a short, **clinical** paragraph of what the independent review committee had so far managed to reconstruct.

"Nine," her father said, reading over her shoulder at the kitchen table. "Out of forty-three. In three weeks."

"Halvard told me to expect this would be **glacial**," Nora said. "Her word. She said the documentation is **fragmentary** in places — entire sections written in a hand nobody on the committee can read yet, which is apparently a problem only two people in the world can currently solve."

"Let me guess," her father said, already reaching for his coat.

He and Mr. Voss worked from the archive three afternoons a week through the rest of June, a partnership that had settled, with surprising speed, into something like an old habit neither of them had realised they'd been missing. Nora visited twice and found them exactly as she'd left them the first time — hunched over a table, arguing **amiably** about a dialect marker, except

now there was a noticeboard on the wall behind them with names pinned to it instead of theoretical puzzles, and the arguments had a different weight to them, the weight of work that mattered to people who were not in the room.

"This one," her father said, on her second visit, tapping a name on the board — *Imogen Hale, suppressed 1958, recovered partial memory 2019 following unrelated medical incident, never informed of cause* — "has a granddaughter. Halvard's committee found her last week. She's seventy-one. She's been trying to understand her own grandmother's **erratic** late-life confusion for thirty years, and nobody could tell her why, because nobody who knew was supposed to talk about it."

"What happens now?"

"She gets the truth," Mr. Voss said, without looking up from his own page. "Which is, I am increasingly persuaded, the only **reparation** that actually means anything in cases this old. You cannot give someone back thirty years. You can stop the **deception** from outliving the person it was inflicted on."

Nora thought about Eli, four days from a process that would have made him a stranger to his own life, and said nothing, because there wasn't anything to add to that.

Adaeze did not return to the Unmarked, not formally. She visited twice — once for the inquiry that Halvard's committee convened into eight years of her own **coerced** service, and once, three weeks later, for reasons she did not fully explain to Nora, though Nora suspected it had something to do with Craine, whose name came up in Adaeze's conversation with a

frequency that seemed, increasingly, to be more than purely professional.

"He's not what I expected him to become," Adaeze said, the second time, sitting on the Vales' back step with a coffee she'd been nursing for forty minutes without drinking much of it. "Cowardice for nine years, and then suddenly the only person in that entire council willing to say the **unforgivable** thing out loud." She shrugged. "People surprise you. It's **disconcerting,** at my age, to still be learning that."

"What age is that?"

"Old enough to know better than to answer," Adaeze said, "and young enough to still occasionally not."

Theo and Sable's friction, the one that had surfaced briefly during the planning and then vanished under the weight of everything that followed, resurfaced in July in a smaller, gentler form — not a fight, exactly, more a slow, ongoing negotiation conducted almost entirely through the **medium** of competitive sarcasm, which Nora had come to understand was simply how they communicated and would, in all likelihood, continue to be how they communicated for the **foreseeable** future. She mentioned this once to Eli, who laughed for an uncomfortably long time.

"You really didn't notice," he said, "for eleven days."

"I had other things going on."

"Sure," he said. "Sure you did."

In late July, the inner council — what remained of it, after a **purge** that Halvard's committee oversaw with a thoroughness that left no ambiguity about who had known what and chosen silence anyway — issued its first public-facing statement to the full membership. Craine showed it to them before it went out, sitting at the same kitchen table where the whole **reckoning** had effectively begun, reading it aloud in his careful, **measured** voice.

It admitted everything. The suppressions, the decades of unaccountable authority, the specific and **culpable** decision to take Eli. It named names — Vera Strand's among them, her position formally and permanently **revoked**, an outcome that Nora's mother received with the brief, satisfied nod of someone confirming a prediction rather than receiving news. It established, in language that Nora's father said had clearly been drafted by someone who'd finally read enough of the Lexicon to understand exactly what kind of language could no longer be trusted, a permanent independent body with the authority to investigate any future suppression **immediately**, with no internal review first.

"It's not enough," Craine said, when he'd finished reading it. "I want to be honest about that. No statement is enough, measured against forty-three lives. But it's the most honest document this organisation has produced about itself in six hundred years, and I think that has to count for something."

"It counts," Nora's mother said, "for a beginning. Which is the only thing it was ever going to be able to be."

Eli went back to school in September, two days late, with a story about a family emergency that was, technically, almost entirely true. He seemed, to Nora, mostly himself again by then — sharper around certain edges, quieter in ways that hadn't been there before, prone to a stillness she recognised because she'd started noticing it in her own reflection too. He still had the *Count of Monte Cristo* paperback on his shelf. He'd started reading it properly, finally, a chapter at a time, and refused, with a **deliberate** and faintly maddening **obstinacy**, to tell her how far he'd got.

"You gave it to me," she pointed out. "I think I'm entitled to a progress report."

"You're entitled," he said, "to wait, like everyone else who's ever read a good book, and find out the ending when it actually arrives."

It was, she thought, an extremely Eli thing to say, and also — though she didn't tell him this — exactly the kind of thing their father would have said, twenty years younger, before three decades of **obstructed** research had taught him to be more careful about what he let himself say out loud.

She was still thinking about that, weeks later, when the letter came.

SAT Words in This Chapter: precise · obscure · clinical · glacial · fragmentary · amiably · erratic · reparation · deception · coerced · unforgivable · disconcerting · medium · foreseeable · purge · reckoning · measured · culpable · revoked · immediately · deliberate · obstinacy · obstructed

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twenty-One: The Letter

It arrived on an ordinary Thursday in October, addressed in handwriting Nora didn't recognise, with no return address and a postmark from a town she'd never heard of three counties away. She almost set it aside with the rest of the mail — bills, a university **prospectus** her mother had ordered out of what Nora suspected was pure habitual **vigilance**, a flyer for a pizza place — except that the envelope was heavier than it should have been, and when she opened it, a second, older envelope slid out from inside the first, yellowed at the **creases**, sealed with wax that had cracked decades ago and never been disturbed.

The outer letter was brief.

Miss Vale — My grandmother kept this in a box under her bed for sixty years and told my mother, before she died, that it was "for whoever finally asked the right questions." I read about the broadcast in March. I think you're the right person. — I. Hale.

Imogen Hale. The granddaughter her father had mentioned in June — seventy-one years old, thirty years of unexplained confusion finally **accounted for.** Nora sat very still at the kitchen table for a long moment before she let herself open the second envelope.

It was a single page, written in a hand so careful it might have been **calligraphy**, dated nineteen fifty-eight.

If you are reading this, I did not get the chance to say it myself, which means they have done what they said they would do. I want whoever finds this to know that I was not confused. I was not mistaken. I found a discrepancy in the eastern translation registry that should not have existed, and I asked the wrong person about it, and I am writing this now because I do not trust that I will remember writing it tomorrow. My name is Imogen Hale. I am forty-one years old. I have a daughter. Please tell her I loved her, in case I am made to forget that I did.

Nora read it three times before she trusted her voice enough to call for her father.

He read it at the table, in the lamp light, with the particular **gravity** he reserved for documents that mattered, and when he finished he set it down with a care that suggested his hands weren't entirely steady.

"She knew," he said. "She wrote this *knowing,* in advance, what they were about to do to her. That's not — " he stopped, searching, the way he always searched, for the precise word rather than the approximate one " — that's not **passive** suffering. That's a woman fighting back with the only **instrument** she had left, which was a piece of paper and the hope that someone, eventually, would read it."

"She did get a chance to say it herself," Nora said. "Just sixty-eight years later than she expected to."

Her father looked at her for a long moment. "Halvard needs to see this," he said. "Today, if possible. This is **primary** evidence

in a way almost nothing else in that archive is — everything else was written by the people who did the suppressing. This was written by someone who knew it was about to happen to her."

"And Imogen Hale's granddaughter," Nora said. "She should see it first. Before the committee, before anyone else. It was written for her mother. It should go to family before it goes to **bureaucracy.**"

Her father considered this with the seriousness he gave everything, then nodded slowly. "You're right," he said. "I'll call Halvard and tell her it exists. But you should be the one to take it to the granddaughter, if she's willing to see you. You're the reason any of this is **traceable** back to a person instead of a case file."

Edith Hale lived two hours away, in a small house with an overgrown **trellis** of roses gone slightly wild over the porch, and she opened the door before Nora had finished walking up the path, as if she'd been watching from the window for exactly this kind of arrival for longer than she would probably admit.

"You're the Vale girl," she said. "I read about you in the spring. I didn't think anyone would actually come."

"I have something of your mother's," Nora said. "I think you should sit down before I give it to you."

Edith Hale read the letter at her kitchen table, in a kitchen not unlike Nora's own, with the same kind of light coming through a similar window, and when she finished she was quiet for a long

time, holding the page with both hands as though it might otherwise drift away from her.

"Thirty years," she said finally, "I watched her get **erratic** and frightened and ashamed of her own mind, and the doctors had no explanation, and I told myself it was simply what happened to people, that it was just the unkind **trajectory** of growing old. I never once considered that someone had done it to her on purpose." She looked up. "She knew it was coming. She wrote this *knowing*."

"She wanted you to know she loved you," Nora said. "That was the part she was most afraid of losing."

Edith Hale cried for a while, in the careful, **contained** way of someone who had cried alone for thirty years and had not yet relearned how to do it with another person in the room, and Nora sat with her and did not try to make it smaller than it was, because she had learned, over the past several months, that some things were not supposed to be made smaller.

"Thank you," Edith said, eventually. "For bringing this. For finding any of it."

"I didn't find your mother's letter," Nora said. "You did. You're the one who's been carrying the question for thirty years. I just happened to be standing nearby when an answer finally became possible."

She told the others about it that evening, around the same kitchen table where the letter had first been opened — Theo, Sable, Eli, her parents, even Adaeze, who'd come by for dinner

with an ease that had become, over the months, entirely unremarkable. Craine listened from the end of the table with an expression Nora had started to recognise as his particular way of taking something seriously — a stillness that went all the way down.

"There are forty-one more," he said, when she'd finished. "Possibly more we haven't even identified. Some of them won't have anything as clear as a letter under a bed. Some of them won't have anyone left alive to receive an answer at all."

"I know," Nora said.

"I'm not saying it to **discourage** you," he said. "I'm saying it because I think you should understand, clearly, what you're choosing if you keep doing this. It's not going to feel like the common room again. There's no single dramatic morning where everything **resolves.** It's going to be quiet, **incremental,** mostly thankless work for years, finding people who don't know there's anything to find."

Nora looked around the table — at her brother, who'd been found because she refused to stop looking; at Theo and Sable, who'd risked considerably more than either of them liked to admit out loud; at Adaeze, eight years **reclaimed**; at her parents, who had never once, in the entire strange unfolding of this story, told her to stop.

"Good," she said. "I think that's exactly the kind of work that's worth doing."

SAT Words in This Chapter: prospectus · vigilance · creases · accounted · calligraphy · discrepancy · gravity · passive · instrument · primary · bureaucracy · traceable · trellis · erratic · trajectory · contained · discourage · resolves · incremental · reclaimed

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twenty-Two: Loose Ends

The first sign that not everyone had accepted the new order came in November, in the form of a phone call to Mr. Voss at eleven at night, from a number that did not appear in any directory he could access.

He told Nora about it the next afternoon, in the archive, with a **measured** calm she suspected he'd had to manufacture for the occasion. "A man's voice," he said. "Not one I recognised. He didn't threaten me **directly** — he was far too **circumspect** for that. He simply observed that the committee's work was proceeding at a pace some people found 'concerning,' and that it might be wise to remember how much **institutional** memory still existed outside the official record."

"That's a threat," Sable said, from across the table, where she'd been helping catalogue a fresh batch of names with the kind of focus she brought to everything she considered worth doing properly.

"It's a threat dressed as a **courtesy,**" Mr. Voss said. "Which is, I'd suggest, the house style of everyone who served under Vera Strand for long enough to learn her **idiom.**"

Craine, when they told him, did not look surprised. "There were forty or so people on the inner council and **adjacent** staff," he said, "and the purge only removed eleven of them — the ones whose **complicity** was direct enough to prove. The rest are still there, technically reformed, practically resentful. I'd be more

alarmed if nobody had pushed back at all. It would mean we'd missed something."

"What do we do?" Nora asked.

"Nothing **rash,**" Craine said. "We document it. We tell Halvard's committee, because a man who calls an archivist at eleven at night to make **veiled** threats about institutional memory is a man who is afraid of exactly the kind of work we're doing, which means we're doing it correctly." He paused. "And we don't let it slow us down. That's the **objective** here — not to win an argument with him, but to make the work so thoroughly public and so **comprehensively** documented that threatening it becomes pointless."

Halvard's response, when it came, was characteristically brisk. Within a week, the committee had published a second statement — shorter than the first, and considerably more pointed — confirming that all correspondence threatening or attempting to **intimidate** anyone involved in the ongoing review would be treated as evidence in its own right, logged, and forwarded to the full membership without **redaction.**

"That's clever," Theo said, reading it over Nora's shoulder. "She's not threatening to punish them. She's just promising to make whatever they do next part of the permanent record. Which is the one thing none of these people can **tolerate.**"

"It's the whole **strategy,** really," Sable said. "Light. Just — relentless, **methodical** light, until there's nowhere left that's dark enough to hide in."

No further calls came, not to Mr. Voss, not to anyone else they knew about. Whether that meant the threat had been genuinely **deterred,** or simply gone quiet to wait for a less watchful moment, was a question Craine declined to answer with any false **confidence.**

"I don't know," he said, when Nora asked him directly. "I'd like to tell you it's over. I think the honest answer is that it's never entirely over, for an institution this old, with this much to protect. What's changed is that it's no longer **invisible.** That's not nothing. It's just not everything, either."

Closer to home, the autumn brought its own smaller **reckonings.**

Her father's paper — the one suppressed twenty-two years earlier by journal editors with **undisclosed** Unmarked affiliations — was finally published in December, with a new preface acknowledging the original **suppression** by name, and a dedication that made Nora's mother cry at the breakfast table in a way Nora had genuinely never seen before.

For Eli, who made it necessary to ask the right question, and for Nora, who refused to stop asking it.

"You could have just said thank you," Nora told him, mortified and pleased in roughly equal measure.

"I'm a linguist," her father said. "This is how I say thank you. I've been working on the precise **phrasing** for three weeks."

"It shows."

"Thank you," he said, "I worked very hard on it."

Theo's parents found out everything in October, in a conversation Theo described afterward as "going about as well as could be expected, which is to say, badly, for approximately forty minutes, and then surprisingly well after that." His mother had, it turned out, a second cousin whose disappearance forty years ago had never been satisfactorily explained, a detail that took on an entirely new significance once she understood what kind of organisation her son had spent the autumn **infiltrating.**

"She wants the case looked into," Theo told Nora. "Officially. Through the committee."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"It's good," Theo agreed. "It's also strange, watching my own family become one of the names on the list instead of just people who help look for them." He was quiet for a moment. "I think that's going to keep happening, the longer this goes on. Every family's got something **buried** somewhere, if you dig deep enough. We just happened to find the shovel."

Sable's family — the Morrow side, the one that had founded the archive generations back — took the news with the kind of weary, generational **resignation** of people who had clearly suspected something for a long time without ever having the specific facts to confirm it. Her great-aunt, ninety-three and formidable, told Sable over tea that she'd always thought there

was something "**unaccountably** odd" about how thoroughly her own grandmother had refused, on her deathbed, to discuss certain donors to the original archive fund.

"She knew," Sable said to Nora, afterward, with the particular flatness of someone still **processing** a piece of family history that had just rearranged itself. "Not everything. But she knew something was wrong, and she let it go quiet because that was easier, and now I have to decide whether that makes her **complicit** or just human."

"Maybe both," Nora said. "I don't think those cancel each other out."

"No," Sable agreed. "I don't think they do either."

By the time the first snow came, the committee's list had grown to nineteen names accounted for, out of forty-three — not a majority, not even close, but a number that had started to feel, to Nora, less like a debt and more like a **trajectory.** Imogen Hale's letter sat, framed now, on Edith Hale's mantelpiece, the first thing visible from her front door. Halvard had begun training a second researcher to read the older Codex Script variants, so the work would no longer depend on two men in their seventies and seventy-one being available three afternoons a week for the rest of their lives.

"It's not finished," Nora said to Eli one evening, watching snow start to settle on the garden through his bedroom window. "It's not going to be finished for years."

"No," he agreed. "But it's moving. That's different from being stuck, which is what it was for four hundred years before any of this started."

She thought about that for a while — about **momentum**, about the difference between an ending and a direction — and found, somewhat to her own surprise, that she could live with the second far more easily than she'd ever expected to live with the first.

SAT Words in This Chapter: measured · directly · circumspect · institutional · courtesy · idiom · adjacent · complicity · alarmed · rash · veiled · objective · comprehensively · intimidate · redaction · tolerate · strategy · methodical · deterred · confidence · invisible · reckonings · undisclosed · suppression · phrasing · infiltrating · buried · resignation · unaccountably · processing · complicit · trajectory · momentum

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Quiet Ones

The caller's identity surfaced in February, and it was, in the end, almost **anticlimactic** in how little drama attached to it.

His name was Aldous Pryce. He had been Vera Strand's **deputy** for six years, never named in the original purge because his own hands had stayed technically clean — he had approved budgets, not suppressions, and budgets, it turned out, were a wonderfully effective way to fund **atrocities** without ever personally authorising one. Halvard's committee found him through a piece of evidence so **mundane** it almost felt like an anticlimax: a phone bill, subpoenaed as part of an unrelated financial review, showing a single eleven-minute call placed to a number registered to the Morrow Archive at eleven seventeen on a Tuesday night in November.

"He's resigned," Craine told them, the evening the news broke, sitting at the Vale kitchen table with the particular weariness he seemed to reserve for news that was good but not, in any meaningful sense, **satisfying.** "Quietly. No statement. No admission. He simply submitted his resignation to Halvard's office and left the country two days later."

"That's it?" Theo said. "He threatened Mr. Voss and just — gets to leave?"

"He gets to leave," Craine agreed, "with his name in the permanent record, his career in this organisation **terminated,** and every future reference check anyone runs on him for the rest of his life turning up a committee report describing exactly

what he did. That's not nothing, even if it doesn't feel like much from here." He paused. "I'd remind you that a year ago, the idea of any consequence at all attaching to anyone on that council would have seemed **implausible.** We're not getting the dramatic ending. We're getting the slow, **bureaucratic** one. I think, given everything, that's the one that actually holds."

Mr. Voss, when Nora visited him at the archive the following week, seemed entirely **unbothered** by the whole resolution — more interested, if anything, in a fourteenth-century marginal note he'd just deciphered than in the fate of the man who'd called him at eleven at night. "I am seventy-two years old," he said, without looking up from his page. "I have spent considerably more of my life being careful than I would now like to admit. I find I have very little appetite left for being **vindictive** about a man who has already lost everything that mattered to him. Let him go. There is real work to do."

Spring brought its own kind of resolution, smaller and entirely personal.

Nora's university applications were due in March, and she filled them out at the kitchen table over three difficult evenings, staring at a question — *describe an experience that changed your understanding of yourself* — that she could not, for **obvious** reasons, answer honestly in any of the ways the form clearly expected.

"You could write about the debate team," her mother suggested, not unkindly, reading over her shoulder. "Or the time you organised the food drive in Year Eleven. Either of those would make a perfectly good **conventional** answer."

"They're not what changed anything," Nora said. "It feels strange writing eight hundred words about a food drive when the actual answer is *I found out language could be a weapon and a record and an apology all at once, and then I spent a year learning the difference*."

"Then write around it," her father suggested, from across the table, not looking up from his own marking. "You don't need to name the thing **directly** to write about what it taught you. Half of good writing is **precision** about what you can say and **discipline** about what you can't."

In the end, she wrote about her brother — not the archive, not the Unmarked, none of the **specific**, unrepeatable details, but the eleven days she'd spent learning that some mysteries do not resolve through patience or waiting, that some require you to be **relentlessly**, **deliberately** difficult on someone else's behalf, and that this — being difficult, on purpose, for a good reason — was a skill nobody had ever told her she had until she needed it.

It was the most honest thing she'd ever submitted to anyone who wasn't already inside the secret. She sent it without **second-guessing** it, which felt, in itself, like a small act of the same kind of courage the essay was actually about.

Eli's recovery, eight months on, had settled into something Nora thought of as a new **equilibrium** rather than a return to what he'd been before — not worse, exactly, just different, the way a sentence reads differently once you know there was a redaction in an earlier draft of it. He'd started keeping a notebook, not unlike Theo's, full of his own observations about the Unmarked, the Lexicon, the slow churn of names being recovered one at a

time. He showed Nora a page of it, once, without being asked, which she understood to be a significant gesture.

Nineteen found. Twenty-four to go. Some of them won't have anyone left to tell. I think we still have to find out their names anyway. A name that nobody says out loud is the same as a suppression that worked.

"That's good," Nora said. "You should be writing this down properly. For the committee, I mean. Not just for yourself."

"Maybe," Eli said. "I think for now it's still mostly for myself." He shrugged, a small, careful motion she'd come to recognise as entirely his own. "I'm allowed to keep some of it just for me, aren't I? Not everything has to go into the **archive.**"

"Yes," Nora said, surprised by how much she meant it. "You're allowed that."

Adaeze and Craine made it **official**, in their own quiet way, at a small gathering in May that nobody called anything as **formal** as an engagement party, though it functioned as one in every practical sense. Nora's mother brought a cake. Mr. Voss brought a first edition he refused to explain the provenance of. Halvard came for twenty minutes between meetings and left a card that, when Adaeze opened it later, turned out to contain a single line: *You were never voluntary. I am glad you are, now, finally choosing things on purpose.*

"That woman," Adaeze said, reading it twice, "says more in nine words than most people manage in a speech."

"It runs in the committee," Craine said. "I think it's a job requirement."

By the time the school year ended, the **trajectory** Nora had named back in winter had become something closer to a settled fact: twenty-six names accounted for, seventeen still to find, a second researcher fully trained in the older script variants, and a committee structure that no longer depended, even slightly, on any single person's continued willingness to keep showing up.

It would, Nora understood, outlast her own involvement eventually. That was the entire point of building it properly. She found, somewhat to her surprise, that she could hold that thought — *this will go on without me, someday* — without it feeling like loss. It felt, instead, like the precise opposite of everything the Unmarked had spent six centuries protecting: a thing built to be **durable** specifically because it no longer depended on staying secret.

SAT Words in This Chapter: anticlimactic · deputy · atrocities · mundane · terminated · implausible · bureaucratic · unbothered · vindictive · obvious · conventional · directly · precision · discipline · specific · relentlessly · deliberately · second-guessing · equilibrium · archive · official · formal · trajectory · durable

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twenty-Four: One Year

The anniversary fell on an ordinary Wednesday in June, which Nora found she had mixed feelings about. Some part of her had expected the date to announce itself somehow — a change in the light, a shift in the air, something **commensurate** with what it marked. Instead it was simply a Wednesday, mild and slightly overcast, with a maths exam in the morning and nothing on the calendar that acknowledged, in any **external** way, that it had been exactly one year since Eli disappeared from his own bedroom and a symbol scratched into a desk had become the first thread of everything that followed.

She mentioned this to her mother at breakfast, half expecting to be told she was overthinking it, which was the **customary** outcome of most things she mentioned to her mother before eight in the morning.

"I noticed the date weeks ago," her mother said instead, buttering toast with the brisk **efficiency** she brought to everything, including, apparently, grief that had resolved itself well enough to no longer require daily attention. "I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure if marking it would help or simply **reopen** something that's mostly closed now. Which did you want?"

"I don't know," Nora admitted. "I think I wanted someone else to have noticed. That's probably enough."

"Noted," her mother said, and went back to the toast, and that, somehow, was exactly the right amount of **acknowledgement**

for the morning to need.

Eli noticed too, though he didn't say so until that evening, when the two of them ended up on the back step after dinner in the particular unplanned way that had become, over the past year, one of their more reliable rituals.

"One year," he said, looking out at the garden rather than at her, the way he tended to when the thing he was saying mattered more than he wanted to **acknowledge** out loud. "I keep doing the maths without meaning to. Three hundred and sixty-five days since I was an idiot who thought I could handle the Unmarked on my own without telling anyone."

"You weren't an idiot," Nora said. "You were curious about Dad's research, and somebody **exploited** that, and then you got in too deep to get out without help. That's not the same thing."

"Feels the same, some days."

"Most heroic things feel like idiocy from the inside," Nora said. "I think that's just how it works. You don't get the **clarity** until afterward, when someone else is telling the story."

He laughed — a real one, not the careful, **measured** kind he'd been producing for months in places where laughing felt like an obligation rather than an instinct. "When did you get so wise?"

"I had a very **instructive** year," Nora said. "I'd recommend it to absolutely no one, but it was instructive."

They went, that weekend, to see Edith Hale, who had asked specifically — through a letter as carefully **composed** as her mother's had been sixty-eight years earlier — whether Nora and Eli might visit together, since she'd only ever met the one of them. She had Imogen's letter framed on the mantelpiece exactly where Nora had last seen it, and a second frame beside it now, newly added: a photograph of three generations of Hale women, found, Edith explained, in a box that had turned up during the committee's expanded search, taken the summer before Imogen's suppression, nobody in it aware of what was coming.

"She looks happy," Eli said, studying the photograph with the careful attention Nora recognised from every other object he chose to look at properly rather than just glance past.

"She was," Edith said. "I remember that summer, actually — I was eleven. It was the last one before everything changed. I didn't understand for thirty years why it felt, afterward, like the door to my own childhood had quietly closed behind me sometime that autumn. Now I do." She looked at both of them with an expression that held more gratitude than Nora felt entirely able to **accommodate.** "You gave me my mother's actual voice. Not a memory of her getting strange and frightened. Her voice, as she was, before. That's not a small thing to give someone."

"It wasn't just us," Nora said. "There's a whole committee. There's Mr. Voss, and my father, and people you've never met who spend their afternoons reading four-hundred-year-old handwriting so that letters like this one don't stay lost forever."

"I know," Edith said. "But you're the ones who knocked on my door. I'm allowed to be **specifically** grateful to the people who actually showed up, even if a great many other people made it possible for you to."

On the drive home, Eli was quiet for a long stretch of motorway before he finally said what Nora suspected he'd been turning over since they left Edith's house.

"I want to do this properly," he said. "Not just keep a private notebook. I want to actually work with the committee — formally, once I'm old enough that Mum stops vetoing it on **logistical** grounds rather than **principled** ones." He glanced at her. "I think I owe it to the eighteen people we haven't found yet. Maybe more than that. I was one suppression away from being a name somebody's grandchild finds in sixty years. I don't think I get to just — move on from that and pretend it was simply something that happened to me once."

"You don't have to decide that today," Nora said. "You're seventeen. You're allowed to just be a person for a while before you decide what your whole life is going to be **organised** around."

"I know," Eli said. "I'm not deciding today. I'm just telling you what I think the decision is probably going to be, eventually, so it doesn't surprise you when it happens."

Nora thought about that the rest of the drive — about how strange and quietly remarkable it was that her brother, a year on from the worst eleven days of both their lives, had landed not on fear or avoidance but on a clear, **deliberate** sense of what he

owed and to whom. It was, she thought, the most hopeful thing that had happened all year, and it had happened in a car, on a motorway, said almost as an aside.

"For what it's worth," she said, eventually, "I think that's a good decision. Whenever you actually make it."

"I know," Eli said. "That's sort of why I told you first."

SAT Words in This Chapter: commensurate · external · customary · efficiency · reopen · acknowledgement · acknowledge · exploited · clarity · measured · instructive · composed · accommodate · specifically · logistical · principled · organised · deliberate

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Lexicon

Nora left for university in September, fourteen months after the morning a symbol scratched into a desk had become the first thread of everything that followed, and the leaving felt, in its own quiet way, like the final **chapter** of something she hadn't fully understood she'd been writing until she packed the last box.

Her mother insisted on driving her, despite Nora's **assurance** that the train would be perfectly adequate, on the grounds that some **transitions** deserved the inefficiency of a parent who wanted three extra hours in the car. Her father came too, in the back seat, marking essays the entire way with the **characteristic** absorption of a man who loved his children precisely as much by being present and slightly distracted as he could have by being present and entirely focused.

Eli didn't come. He was, that morning, two hours into his first official day shadowing Halvard's committee — seventeen years old, technically still in school, attending in an unpaid, **provisional** capacity that everyone involved understood would become permanent the day he turned eighteen. He'd hugged her at six that morning, before she'd even finished her coffee, with a brevity that hid, she knew, exactly how much the moment actually weighed.

"Find me a good word," he'd said. "For whatever it is, going off to actually become whoever you're going to be."

"I'll look it up," she'd said. "I'll bring it back for the **glossary.**"

She thought of that exchange three weeks later, sitting in a lecture hall during an introductory linguistics module she'd added almost on impulse — a small, **deliberate** echo of her father that she hadn't entirely admitted to herself until she was already enrolled — when the lecturer, discussing semantic shift, used a word Nora had never encountered in any of the **glossaries** she'd helped compile over the past year.

Palimpsest. A manuscript reused, the older text scraped away but never entirely gone — visible still, beneath whatever had been written over it, if you knew how to look and held the page to the right light.

She wrote it down, underlined it twice, and thought, with the particular clarity of a thought arriving exactly where it belonged, that it was the truest word anyone had given her in fourteen months for what the whole story had actually been. Not a weapon. Not even, quite, a record. A **palimpsest** — every suppression an attempt to scrape a name away entirely, and every name they'd found since simply proof that nothing written with that much **conviction** ever fully disappears, no matter how carefully someone tries to write over it.

She sent it to Eli that evening. *Found your word.*

Good? he wrote back.

The best one yet, she typed. *I'll explain properly at Christmas. It's going to need the whole story.*

By December, the committee's count stood at thirty-one names accounted for out of forty-three, a number that had stopped feeling, to Nora, like an unfinished debt and started feeling like simply what the work was — ongoing, **incremental,** without a finish line that anyone reasonably expected to see in her own lifetime, and entirely worth doing anyway. Halvard had begun training a third researcher. Mr. Voss, seventy-three now, had finally agreed, after considerable persuasion from Nora's father, to take on an actual **apprentice** rather than simply allowing younger scholars to **orbit** the archive hopefully and learn what they could by **osmosis.**

Theo and Sable were, by all reports relayed faithfully and at length by Eli, still navigating their own particular **negotiation,** which had evolved, sometime in October, into something neither of them would call a relationship but that everyone else had stopped pretending wasn't one. Adaeze and Craine had set a date for the spring. Vera Strand had not been heard from since the resignation, a silence Craine described as "the single most **reliable** outcome of the entire affair," and one that nobody, Nora included, found themselves missing.

And the Lexicon itself — the actual document, the physical, **indestructible** thing that had started all of it — remained exactly where it had always been, in the restricted archive three levels beneath an ordinary building in an ordinary city, except that now the door to that archive stood permanently open, its contents catalogued, photographed, and **distributed** across a network deliberately designed never again to depend on a single guarded room.

It had never been a weapon, in the end. Nora understood that more **completely** now than she had standing in the common

room a year ago, saying the word out loud for the first time to a room full of strangers. It had only ever been what her father's whole career had spent thirty years insisting language fundamentally was: a way of making sure something true did not have to depend on a single person's memory to survive. The Unmarked had spent six centuries treating that as a danger to be contained. Nora had spent eleven days, and then a year, and now, it seemed, the **foreseeable** future, treating it as the entire point.

She called Eli on Christmas Eve, the night before she was due back, and asked him, finally, to tell her properly what *palimpsest* had become to him in the months since she'd sent it.

"I looked it up myself," he admitted. "I didn't just take your word for it."

"Of course you didn't."

"I think," he said, slowly, in the careful way that had become, over the past year, entirely his own rather than borrowed from anyone else in the family, "that it's not just a word for what happened to the names in the archive. I think it's a word for what happened to me, too. I'm not the same person who got pulled into a hidden room under the city fourteen months ago. But I'm not a different person either. He's still there. Scraped at, but not gone. You can still read him, if you hold the page to the right light."

Nora sat with that for a long moment, the phone warm against her ear, her new university room quiet around her, four hundred miles and fourteen months from the desk where a

symbol had first been scratched into wood by a brother who hadn't yet known how much it would cost him, or how much it would eventually give back.

"That's a good word," she said, finally. "I think Dad would be proud of that definition."

"I learned it from somewhere," Eli said. "I had a very **instructive** year."

"I'd recommend it to absolutely no one," Nora said, "but it was instructive."

She could hear him smiling, four hundred miles away, in the particular silence that meant he understood exactly which conversation she was quoting back to him.

"Come home soon," he said.

"I will," she said. "I'm not going anywhere that matters. I think that's the whole point of everything we did. Nobody has to **disappear** for anyone to grow up."

She hung up, and sat for a while in the quiet of her room, and thought about names — the forty-three, the thirty-one found and the twelve still missing, her own and her brother's and Imogen Hale's, written down at last where the light could reach them — and understood, with the kind of certainty that had taken her a full year to earn, that this was not an ending so much as a **threshold**, and that some stories were never meant to close at all. They were only ever meant to stay open, **legible,** for as long as someone was willing to keep reading.

SAT Words in This Chapter: chapter · assurance · transitions · characteristic · provisional · glossary · deliberate · glossaries · palimpsest · conviction · incremental · apprentice · orbit · osmosis · negotiation · reliable · indestructible · distributed · completely · foreseeable · instructive · disappear · threshold · legible

(Definitions can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book.)

THE END

Glossary

Every SAT vocabulary word used in The Lexicon Conspiracy*, collected from all twenty-five chapters and defined as it's used in the story. Words are listed alphabetically.*

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abrupt — sudden and unexpected, without warning.

absolute — complete and total; not qualified or diminished.

absolution — formal release from guilt or blame.

absorbing — holding one's complete attention.

abstracted — preoccupied; not fully attentive to one's surroundings.

accelerating — increasing in speed or intensity.

accommodate — to make room for, or adjust to fit, someone's needs.

accountability — the obligation to answer for one's actions.

accountable — required to explain or justify one's actions.

accounted (for) — explained or documented.

accurate — free from error; precise.

acerbity — sharpness or bitterness of tone.

acknowledge — to admit or recognize as true.

acknowledgement — recognition of a fact or contribution.

acute — sharp, intense, or perceptive.

adequately — to a satisfactory or sufficient extent.

adjacent — next to, or adjoining.

adversaries — opponents or enemies.

aesthetic — relating to beauty or artistic taste.

affinities — natural likenesses, connections, or attractions between things.

agency — the capacity to act independently and make one's own choices.

aggrieved — feeling resentment over unfair treatment.

alarmed — filled with sudden fear or concern.

allies — people or groups who cooperate with one another.

ambient — relating to the immediate surroundings of a place.

ambiguous — open to more than one interpretation; unclear.

ambulatory — able to walk; not bedridden.

amiably — in a friendly, good-natured manner.

analytical — using logical reasoning to examine something.

anomalous — deviating from what is standard or expected.

anticlimactic — disappointingly less dramatic than expected.

appraising — evaluating or assessing the worth of something.

apprehension — anxiety or fear about something that may happen.

apprehensive — anxious or fearful about the future.

apprentice — someone learning a trade or skill under a more experienced practitioner.

archival — relating to historical records or documents.

archive — a collection of historical documents or records; the place where they're kept.

arduous — extremely difficult, requiring great effort.

assertive — confident and direct in stating one's views.

assessment — an evaluation or appraisal.

assimilate — to absorb and fully understand or incorporate.

assurance — a confident statement intended to give confidence.

astonishment — great surprise.

astute — having sharp judgment; perceptive.

atrocities — extremely cruel or brutal acts.

audacious — boldly daring, sometimes recklessly so.

authoritative — commanding respect; reliably accurate.

brazen — bold and shameless.

brevity — shortness of expression or duration.

brisk — quick and energetic.

bureaucracy — an administrative system governed by many rigid rules and procedures.

bureaucratic — characterized by excessive procedure and red tape.

buried — hidden or concealed, often deliberately.

cadence — a rhythmic flow of sound or speech.

calculus — a method of calculation or reasoning; careful weighing of factors.

calibration — careful adjustment to ensure accuracy.

calligraphy — decorative, artistic handwriting.

candour — openness and honesty in expression.

catastrophic — extremely harmful or disastrous.

categorise — to sort into groups based on shared characteristics.

chapter — a distinct section or division of a story.

characteristic — typical of a particular person or thing.

characteristically — in a way that is typical of someone.

circumspect — careful to consider consequences before acting; cautious.

circumspection — wariness and caution.

clandestine — kept secret, often for an illicit purpose.

clarity — clearness of thought or expression.

clean — (figurative) free of wrongdoing.

clinical — detached and objective, almost coldly so.

coalesce — to come together to form one whole.

coerced — forced into doing something through pressure or threats.

coercing — forcing someone through pressure or threats.

coercion — the use of force or threats to compel action.

coercively — in a forceful, threatening manner.

coherent — logical and consistent; easy to follow.

collaboration — working jointly with others on a task.

collective — done or shared by all members of a group.

commensurate — corresponding in size or degree; proportionate.

complacent — uncritically satisfied with oneself; unaware of danger.

completely — totally; in every way.

complicit — involved with others in wrongdoing.

complicity — involvement in wrongdoing alongside others.

composed — calm and in control of one's emotions.

composure — control over one's emotions or actions.

comprehensive — complete and including everything necessary.

comprehensively — thoroughly and completely.

concession — something granted or given up in negotiation.

confidence — firm trust or belief.

confinement — the state of being enclosed or restricted.

confrontation — a hostile or direct meeting between opposing sides.

consensus — general agreement among a group.

consequences — results or effects of an action.

consequential — important; having significant results.

conspicuously — in a way that attracts attention.

consultation — a meeting to discuss or exchange views.

contained — controlled or kept within limits.

contextualised — explained with relevant background information.

contrition — sincere remorse for wrongdoing.

convening — calling together a meeting.

conventional — based on accepted standards; ordinary.

conviction — a firm belief; also, certainty of guilt.

cordial — warm and friendly.

corrosive — gradually destructive or damaging.

courtesy — polite, respectful behavior.

cowardice — lack of courage.

creases — folds or lines, often from age or wear.

cryptographic — relating to coded or secret writing.

culpability — responsibility for wrongdoing.

culpable — deserving blame.

cursory — hasty and superficial; lacking attention to detail.

customary — usual; according to habit.

cyclical — recurring in cycles.

dearth — a scarcity or lack of something.

deception — the act of misleading someone.

dedication — a message of devotion at the start of a book; also, commitment to a cause.

defensible — able to be justified or defended.

deference — respectful submission to another's wishes or authority.

deferential — showing respect for someone's authority.

deliberate — done intentionally and carefully.

deliberately — intentionally; on purpose.

deputy — a person appointed to act as a substitute for another.

destabilise — to undermine the stability of something.

detached — emotionally distant or uninvolved.

determination — firmness of purpose; resolve.

deterred — discouraged from acting through fear of consequences.

diligence — careful, persistent effort.

directly — without anything intervening; straightforwardly.

disappear — to cease to be visible or present.

disarray — a state of disorder or confusion.

discipline — controlled behavior resulting from training.

disconcerting — unsettling; causing unease.

discourage — to dissuade someone from doing something.

discrepancy — a difference or inconsistency between facts.

discretion — the quality of being careful about what one says or does.

dismay — a feeling of distress or disappointment.

dismissal — rejection or refusal to consider something seriously.

disorienting — causing confusion about one's surroundings.

dispassionate — not influenced by strong emotion; impartial.

disposition — a person's inherent qualities of character.

dissent — disagreement with a widely held view.

distinction — a difference or contrast; also, excellence.

distinctly — clearly and unmistakably.

distress — extreme anxiety or suffering.

distributed — spread out or shared among many.

disuse — the state of no longer being used.

diverge — to separate and go in different directions.

diversion — something that distracts attention.

dour — stern, unfriendly, and humorless.

dry — (of humor) understated and deadpan.

durable — able to withstand wear; lasting.

duress — threats or pressure used to force someone to act.

dynamic — constantly changing or active.

editorialising — inserting personal opinion into a supposedly factual account.

efficiency — the ability to achieve results without wasted effort.

elaborate — detailed and complex.

enforced — imposed by force or authority.

engagement — active involvement or commitment.

enigmatic — mysterious and difficult to understand.

entropy — a gradual decline into disorder.

equable — calm and even-tempered; not easily disturbed.

equanimity — mental calmness in difficult situations.

equilibrium — a state of balance.

equivalent — equal in value or significance.

eroding — gradually wearing away or weakening.

erratic — irregular and unpredictable.

euphemism — a mild expression substituted for a harsh or blunt one.

exhausted — completely worn out; also, used up entirely.

expedient — convenient and practical, sometimes at the expense of principle.

exploited — taken unfair advantage of.

external — coming from outside.

fabrication — an invented falsehood.

feasible — possible to do; practical.

febrile — feverish; nervously excited.

fluctuation — irregular variation or change.

foreboding — a sense that something bad is about to happen.

foreseeable — able to be predicted or anticipated.

formal — official and following established rules.

formidable — inspiring fear or respect through strength.

formulaic — following a fixed, predictable pattern.

forthcoming — willing to share information.

fragmentary — incomplete; made up of disconnected pieces.

fragmenting — breaking into pieces.

framework — a basic structure underlying a system or concept.

futile — incapable of producing a useful result; pointless.

glacial — extremely cold or slow; emotionally distant.

glossaries — alphabetical lists of terms with definitions.

glossary — an alphabetical list of terms with definitions.

gravity — seriousness or importance.

guarded — cautious and reluctant to reveal information.

heightened — increased in intensity.

hesitation — a pause due to uncertainty.

hierarchy — a system ranking people or things by status.

humane — showing compassion and benevolence.

hypothesis — a proposed explanation made on limited evidence.

idiom — a characteristic style or mode of expression.

immediately — at once; without delay.

imperceptible — too slight to be noticed.

implacable — unable to be calmed or satisfied; relentless.

implausible — not credible or believable.

implications — likely consequences of an action.

improbable — not likely to be true or to happen.

incongruously — in a way that doesn't fit the surrounding context.

inconvenient — causing difficulty or trouble.

incredulous — unwilling or unable to believe something.

incremental — increasing gradually, in small steps.

incursion — a sudden invasion or raid into a territory.

indestructible — unable to be destroyed.

indignant — feeling or showing anger at perceived unfair treatment.

industrious — diligent and hard-working.

inevitable — certain to happen; unavoidable.

infiltrating — entering secretly to gain information or influence.

infraction — a violation of a rule.

ingrained — deeply established; difficult to change.

inscrutable — impossible to understand or interpret.

instincts — natural, unlearned tendencies to respond in a certain way.

institution — an established organization or society.

institutional — relating to an established organization.

instructive — useful in teaching something.

instrument — a tool or means used to achieve something.

insulated — protected or isolated from outside influence.

intent — purpose or intention.

intimidate — to frighten someone into compliance.

intractable — difficult to control or resolve.

intruder — a person who enters somewhere without permission.

intuition — understanding gained without conscious reasoning.

invisible — unable to be seen.

irretrievably — in a way that cannot be recovered or reversed.

irrevocable — unable to be changed or undone.

laborious — requiring great effort.

labyrinthine — extremely complex and confusing, like a maze.

languished — remained in a state of suffering or neglect.

legible — able to be read clearly.

legitimate — conforming to recognized standards; lawful.

liberating — freeing from restriction or oppression.

literacy — the ability to read and write.

logistical — relating to the organization of complex operations.

logistics — the detailed coordination of a complex operation.

lull — a temporary period of quiet or inactivity.

machinery — the underlying systems or processes that make something work.

magnitude — the great size or importance of something.

manage — to handle or control something.

manifesting — becoming apparent or visible.

masterful — showing great skill.

measured — carefully considered; deliberate and controlled.

medium — a means by which something is communicated.

methodical — done in a systematic, orderly way.

methodically — in a systematic, orderly manner.

methodology — a system of methods used in a particular activity.

meticulous — extremely careful and precise.

minimise — to reduce to the smallest possible amount.

minute — extremely small.

miscalculate — to judge a situation wrongly.

miscalculation — an error in judgment or calculation.

mission statement — a formal summary of a group's core purpose.

mitigating — making a situation less severe.

mobilising — organizing people or resources for action.

momentum — the force or speed of movement, or the impetus gained from development.

multitude — a large number of people or things.

mundane — lacking excitement; ordinary.

narrative — a spoken or written account of events; a particular way of presenting a story.

nefarious — wicked or criminal.

negligible — too small to be of importance.

negotiation — discussion aimed at reaching an agreement.

nonchalant — calm and casual, unconcerned.

naïve — lacking experience or sophistication; overly trusting.

objective — a goal; or, free from bias.

oblique — indirect; not straightforward.

obscure — not well known; unclear.

obstinacy — stubborn refusal to change one's mind.

obstructed — blocked or hindered.

obstruction — something that blocks or hinders progress.

obtrusively — in a way that is noticeably and unwelcomely prominent.

obvious — easily seen or understood.

official — authorized by a position of authority.

orbit — to move around something; figuratively, to remain near without full involvement.

organised — arranged in a structured, systematic way.

osmosis — the gradual, often unconscious absorption of ideas.

ostensibly — apparently, though not necessarily truly.

palimpsest — a manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for new text, though traces of the original remain visible.

palpable — able to be felt or perceived clearly.

parenthetical — inserted as an aside; secondary to the main point.

passive — accepting what happens without resistance.

passivity — the state of accepting things without resistance.

patience — the capacity to endure delay or difficulty calmly.

perilous — full of danger.

periodically — occurring at regular intervals.

peripheral — of minor relevance; on the outer edge.

perishable — liable to decay or spoil.

persisted — continued steadily despite difficulty.

pertinent — relevant to the matter at hand.

phase transitions — sudden shifts from one state or structure to another.

phrasing — the particular way words are chosen and arranged.

physically — in relation to the body or material world.

plausible — seeming reasonable or probable.

pragmatic — dealing with things practically rather than theoretically.

precise — exact and accurate.

precision — exactness and accuracy.

predecessor — a person who held a position before another.

preempt — to take action to prevent something before it happens.

prevail — to prove more powerful; to win out.

prevarication — speaking evasively to avoid telling the truth.

primary — first in importance or order.

principled — acting in accordance with morals or standards.

privileges — special rights granted to a person or group.

procedural — relating to official or established methods.

process — a series of actions taken to achieve an end.

processing — working through and making sense of information or emotion.

productive — yielding useful results.

prospectus — a printed document advertising a school, business, or scheme.

provenance — the place of origin or earliest known history of something.

provisional — arranged temporarily, subject to change.

proximate — closest in relation; nearest.

proximity — nearness in space or time.

purge — the removal of people considered undesirable from an organization.

purposeful — having a clear sense of intention.

rash — acting without careful thought.

rationally — in a logical, reasoned manner.

recalibrated — readjusted for accuracy.

recalibrating — readjusting for accuracy.

reckless — acting without thinking of consequences.

reckoning — a settling of accounts; a moment of consequence.

reckonings — moments of consequence or judgment.

reclaimed — recovered or taken back.

reconciling — bringing into agreement; resolving a conflict.

recontextualise — to view something in a new framework of understanding.

redaction — the editing or censoring of a text before publication.

reframe — to present in a different way.

relentlessly — without easing or stopping.

reliable — consistently good in quality; dependable.

reopen — to open again, often to revisit unresolved matters.

reparation — making amends for wrong done.

reprehensible — deserving condemnation.

reprieve — temporary relief from danger or difficulty.

reproach — expression of disapproval or disappointment.

resignation — formal withdrawal from a position; also, acceptance of something undesirable.

resigned — having formally given up a position; accepting something unwelcome.

resistance — refusal to accept or comply.

resolution — a firm decision; also, the settling of a conflict.

resolve — firm determination; to settle or solve.

resolves — settles or solves (a problem).

reticent — reluctant to speak about one's thoughts or feelings.

revoked — officially cancelled.

righteousness — moral uprightness.

rigorous — extremely thorough and careful.

romanticise — to make something seem more appealing than it really is.

rudimentary — basic; not fully developed.

rueful — expressing regret in a wry, gentle way.

sabotage — deliberate destruction or disruption.

salient — most noticeable or important.

sanction — official permission, or a penalty for breaking a rule.

sardonic — mocking in a scornful or sarcastic way.

scrutinize — to examine closely and critically.

second-guessing — doubting or revising a decision after the fact.

sentinels — guards or sentries.

significant — important; having great meaning.

solidarity — unity based on shared interests or goals.

specific — clearly defined; particular.

specifically — in a precise and particular way.

stake — a personal interest or involvement in an outcome.

stewardship — the responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.

stoic — enduring hardship without showing feelings.

strategy — a careful plan to achieve a goal.

structural — relating to the basic framework of something.

subliminal — perceived below the threshold of conscious awareness.

substantive — having real importance or value.

subtle — not obvious; delicate or precise.

suppressed — forcibly prevented from being known or expressed.

suppression — the act of forcibly preventing something from being known or expressed.

surreptitious — done secretly to avoid notice.

suspended — temporarily stopped; held in place.

symbol — something that represents something else.

systematised — organized into a structured system.

taut — stretched tight; tense.

tautness — a state of tension or tightness.

tedious — tiresomely long or dull.

tenacity — persistence and determination.

tentative — uncertain or hesitant.

terminated — brought to an end.

threshold — the point at which something begins or changes.

tolerate — to allow the existence of something without interference.

topography — the physical arrangement of a place's features.

traceable — able to be tracked to its origin.

tractable — easy to control or manage.

trajectory — the path something follows toward an outcome.

transitions — changes from one state or stage to another.

traumatic — emotionally distressing or disturbing.

treachery — betrayal of trust.

trellis — a structure for supporting climbing plants.

truth — that which is in accordance with fact.

ubiquitous — present or found everywhere.

unaccountably — in a way that cannot be explained.

unanimous — fully in agreement.

unbothered — not troubled or concerned.

undercurrent — an underlying feeling or tendency not openly expressed.

undisclosed — not made known.

undivided — whole and complete; not split between competing interests.

unforgivable — too serious to be forgiven.

unguarded — without protection; careless in speech or manner.

unhurried — calm and not rushed.

unreadable — impossible to interpret, especially someone's expression.

untenable — not able to be defended or maintained.

utility — usefulness or practicality.

veiled — partially hidden or disguised.

vigilance — alert watchfulness for danger.

vigilant — keeping careful watch for danger.

vindictive — having a desire for revenge.

visceral — felt deeply, as a gut-level instinct rather than rational thought.

vocabulary — the body of words used in a language.

vulnerable — exposed to being harmed.

wariness — caution and watchfulness.